

# From Camouflage to Classroom: Designing a Transition Curriculum for New Student Veterans

Nicholas J. Osborne<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The landscape of higher education necessitates that strategies be in place to meet the needs of an ever changing student population. Since 2009, the Post-9/11 GI Bill has spurred an increased enrollment of student veterans that is forecasted to rise. Students who are veterans have unique experiences related to their service, age, and work-life responsibilities that often serve as barriers on college campuses. Additionally, a moderate number of veterans pursue an academic program while contending with a disability and are subsequently unaware of assistive resources available to them. This practice brief describes the target audience, theory, instructional, and implementation processes of a veterans transition course with the intention that readers can adapt similar strategies appropriate to their own institutional needs.

Keywords: *Veterans, military, disability, first-year experience, transition*

It is no surprise to the higher education community that veterans are arriving on campuses across the country. As students, they are nontraditional in that they are more likely to be first-generation, older than their peers, to have dependents, career-focused, and have had a break in their education (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Kim & Cole, 2013). Some veterans who are college bound have served in various combat capacities prior to their enrollment and these experiences have matured them and set them apart from their civilian peers (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009).

The transition from a structured military environment to a college or university setting can be overwhelming for veterans, who may confront barriers in areas related to academic readiness, navigating the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and their school's administrative procedures, denial of academic credit for military training, as well as integrating into the campus community (Armstrong, Best, & Domenici, 2005; Hassan, Jackson, Lindsay, McCabe, & Sanders, 2010). These stressors are made more challenging by perceptions that faculty and staff do not understand military culture or that they view veterans as a traumatized and possibly dangerous group (Berrett, 2011; Cook & Kim, 2009; Hanafin, 2011; Osborne, 2014). With less than one percent of the U.S. population having served in

the military since 9/11 and the few number of veterans among the faculty and staff ranks of higher education, many veterans isolate themselves and report feeling disconnected from their campus (Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2010; Rumann, Rivera, & Hernandez, 2011). Moreover, for veterans who were injured or wounded during their service, an acquired disability adds another layer of complexity for leveraging effective support services (Elliott, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2011).

## Depiction of the Problem

Aside from the complexities associated with being a nontraditional student and reintegrating into the society at large, some veterans are charged with the difficult task of pursuing a postsecondary education with a disability. Major advances in protective equipment and medical technology has vastly increased battlefield survival rates, though they have also introduced new challenges to care for veterans with complex and multiple injuries (DiRamio & Spires, 2009). Cognitive difficulties are among the most prevalent injuries of modern conflicts. By some estimates, service members have as much as a 40% chance of acquiring a cognitive injury by the time they complete their military service. Predominant among

<sup>1</sup> University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

these injuries are Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder ([PTSD]; Kato, 2010; Radford, 2009; Shea, 2010). Between January 2000 and June 2015, 327,299 total TBI cases were reported, while the number of PTSD diagnoses included 39,264 for non-deployed personnel and 138,197 for deployed personnel. Moreover, the number of individuals with battle-injury limb amputations was 1,645 (Fischer, 2015). It is important to note that these statistics address the major disabilities classified by the VA and do not include other conditions that veterans may confront such as anxiety, burn injuries, vision impairments, military sexual trauma, and learning disabilities.

Veterans with newly acquired injuries are just beginning to develop an understanding of how their disability may affect their learning (Church, 2009; Madaus, Miller, & Vance, 2009). For most veterans, an acquired injury or disability is a new experience for them and few have knowledge of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Section 504 eligibility. Most veterans are unaware of their rights as students with disabilities or how to initiate support for receiving academic accommodations (Madaus, 2009). Compounded with this and making institutional support more complex is that veterans with disabilities are less likely than civilian students to identify as disabled, access disability resources, and request accommodation assistance (Madaus, 2009). Cloos (2015) found in her qualitative study with 10 veterans from 10 different universities that half were unaware that their institution provided support services for students with disabilities. Furthermore, a military culture that emphasizes physical toughness and self-sufficiency and that equates disability with being unable to work and contribute to the mission may explain why some student veterans are reluctant to ask for services (Burnett & Segoria, 2009; Kraus & Rattray, 2013; Osborne, 2014). To mitigate the barriers that veterans encounter during their transition to higher education, and to inform them of the various assistive resources available, an innovative course was developed for first-year and transfer undergraduate veterans.

### Participant Demographics

The transition course was offered at a large (over 40,000 students) public research university in the Midwest, where approximately 400 student veterans are enrolled. The course duration was eight weeks and provided students with two hours of elective credit. Participants from two sections of the course consisted of a total of 21 undergraduate male veterans who were new to campus as first-year or transfer students. The age of the participants ranged from 22-26 years old. Eleven

participants identified as Caucasian (52%), four as Hispanic (19%), three as Asian (14%), and three as African American (14%). The participants spent an average of three years on active duty and six (28%) were still affiliated with the National Guard or Reserves. Thirteen students (62%) had completed at least one deployment in either Iraq or Afghanistan.

### Description of Practice

Transition courses for student veterans are described as a best practice (American Council on Education, 2011; Student Veterans of America, 2011) though their design, implementation, and participants' experiences are underrepresented in the literature. The sporadic availability of veterans classes across the country coupled with wide-ranging syllabi creates uncertainty concerning their effectiveness (Grasgreen, 2012). The impetus to offer a transition course at our university was largely based on survey and focus group data that suggested that the vast size of the campus was overwhelming to new veterans and that their mandatory "101" orientation classes were disproportionately designed for traditional students. As one veteran explained,

I had to sit in this mandatory orientation for first years, and it was brutal. I mean, these kids were right out of their parents' homes. I had traveled around the world and was a squad leader in my platoon. I felt out of place, and the professor wasn't really sure what to do with me.

Furthermore, survey data suggested that approximately 20% ( $N = 100$ ) of our total student veteran population had a disabling condition, though few received services from the VA or through the university's disability resources office or received an academic accommodation.

Student veterans need instructional strategies that reflect their unique backgrounds and provide opportunities for individual growth and integration into higher education. The first-year transition course was designed to fulfill several aims, to: (1) welcome new student veterans and to educate them of the assistive resources on campus and within the community; (2) support their academic readiness through skill development (e.g., note-taking, reading comprehension, effective writing strategies); (3) create a safe and communal space where they could reflect on their transition, beliefs, assumptions, and discuss their new mission as students with other veteran peers; and (4) integrate them into the university by way of campus activities and student organizations.

The course was established around concepts contained within adult learning theory; specifically, andragogy (Knowles, 1980) and transformational learning (Mezirow, 1996). Adult learning offers a useful framework for designing curricula that is self-directed and that integrates student veterans' unique and salient life experiences (see Figure 1). Additionally, the course was framed around concepts from men's studies (O'Neil, 1990; Pollack, 1998); an interdisciplinary field devoted to the study of men, masculinities, gender, and power. Men comprise about 85% of the U.S. military (Military One Source, 2015) and the hyper-masculine environment of the military and its cultural emphasis to be self-sufficient and suppress emotion presents challenges for educators to assist and connect with both male and female veterans (Hamrick & Rumann, 2011; Osborne, 2014), and particularly those with a disability (Kraus & Rattray, 2013). Because open communication was an essential component of the course, men's studies provides helpful strategies for confronting limiting traditional gender norms and a military culture that associates weakness with sharing vulnerable personal experiences (see Figure 2 for course outline).

### Curriculum

Students read two texts in the course; *Life During College: The Veteran's Guide to Success* (Osborne, Arndt, & Coleman, 2015) and *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* (Strayed, 2013). The first text, written specifically for veterans transitioning to higher education, provides information of the different offices within a college or university and the confluence of military and academic culture. It also includes strategies for establishing an academic foundation, connecting with peers and faculty, developing a budget, along with tips for integrating into the campus. The second text is a memoir about a woman who encounters several life-changing events and subsequently walks the Pacific Crest Trail with limited backpacking experience. The "journey" and personal struggles showcased in the text were well received and provided students with an excellent foundation to reflect and share parts of their personal story.

When working with adults, reflection and dialogue are key elements of the learning process (Dirkx, 1998). The course was designed to draw out veterans' experiences in the military and transition to the university by way of weekly writing prompts followed by informal student-led presentations. The curriculum centered on activities that supported students with communicating their thinking in both written and spoken form. Prompts consisted of intentionally vague questions that inspired personal reflection and group discussion (see Figure 3).

### Evaluation of Observed Outcomes

The primary outcomes described here were generated by students' written and oral feedback, a post-course evaluation, and ongoing communication with a university disability access specialist. The program is noted for establishing a communal and supportive environment that empowered student veterans to disclose aspects of their transition they found challenging. Through this process, several students disclosed disabling conditions and were receptive to receive assistance without shame or embarrassment.

### Community

The course created a safe and respectful setting to support reflection and *authentic engagement*, which contributed to a sense of community. Authentic engagement is defined by the author as the ability for the student veterans in the course to communicate honestly; including vulnerabilities, while minimizing "small talk" about things like sports, politics, or pop culture. Examples of authentic engagement in the course included discussions surrounding the fear of being a student or feeling out of place on campus in addition to other personal life circumstances, such as divorce, parenthood, loss of a loved one, inadequacy as a man, and combat or military-related stress. While it should be carefully noted that the course was not therapy nor intended to address possible mental health issues, creating a climate where trust, security, and respect were established was essential. As an Army veteran described:

I would look forward to this class because it is the mix between military and school life that I need as I transition. It's difficult to be in class with younger students, and I still hide a lot of who I am. Here I can be more honest and I won't get judged for it. This class reminds me of what I felt like on active duty with a bunch of guys I trust.

### Disability Support

The course provided a pathway to link student veterans with disabilities to support services. Of the 21 students, eight revealed disabling conditions that included anxiety, depression, ADHD, PTSD, and TBI. All eight students accessed disability and counseling services through the course and four of eight received an academic accommodation. A Marine explained:

I've dealt with migraines for the past few months but never really thought it could be related to Iraq. Looking back, it makes sense, though. I don't really think of myself as disabled but if I can get extra help then I'm better off as a student.

### An Opportunity to Explore Masculinity

Throughout the course, students read articles and engaged in dialogue surrounding masculinities and *what it means to be a military man in U.S. culture*. A unique strength of the course, as described by a majority of students, was that they could freely discuss aspects of manhood, including how gender norms are socially constructed and shaped in the military, while in the company of male peers; a topic that most found interesting and complex. During one class discussion, a student remarked that there were few resources available on campus that focused on masculinities or that brought groups of men together for a shared dialogue of their experiences. Several students acknowledged this as an area of interest and four students subsequently reached out as a group to faculty in women and gender studies to request the inclusion of more resources and programming for college men.

### Implications and Portability

The program was effective for establishing an immediate peer community for new student veterans while providing them with an overview of assistive resources and coursework that promoted their academic readiness. Through the community setting and reflective assignments, participants became progressively comfortable communicating the layered experiences of their transition to the university. As one student shared, the course provided “a sense of relief” in that he realized that other veterans were struggling with similar fears and transitional issues. According to a post-course evaluation, all 21 participants “strongly agreed” with the statement, *the transition course was effective in supporting my transition to the university*. More than half recommended that the course be extended to a full semester and several requested that it be mandatory for new student veterans.

Several limitations were also noted in the veterans’ transition course. The first is a lack of female enrollment. Female veteran participation is strong in our university’s student veterans organization, including the number of women who hold leadership positions within the group. It is unclear why female enrollment was low in the course, though the number of incoming veterans at our university are disproportionately male and may partially explain this discrepancy. As of this writing, strategies to recruit more women into the program are being developed. A second limitation that others will need to consider is expense. In a time of budgetary issues, justifying a separate course with low student enrollment may be difficult. Two sections were piloted on our campus to gauge effectiveness and participation and given the success of the program, the course has been

permanently added. To replicate this program, student veterans should be involved throughout the planning process. The transition course was developed through a combination of recommended practices in the literature and in consultation with a first-year experience faculty member and several student veterans.

The program holds much promise for continued research that can be applied broadly and to multiple student populations. The homosocial make-up of the group and its masculinities and male community focus inspired follow-up with our gender and women’s studies department. Additional programming in areas related to college men and masculinities and a course on how gender is constructed in the military are being considered. Other noteworthy observations include how a course of this design can be tailored for other first-year experience programs and underrepresented groups, such as international students, nontraditional learners, and students with disabilities. Feeling “out of place” is a common theme among these groups and a community-based environment that includes reflective exercises may be helpful for assisting and integrating new students onto campus.

### References

- Ackerman, R., DiRamio, D., & Mitchell, R. (2009). Transitions: Combat veterans as college students. In R. Ackerman & D. DiRamio (Eds.). *Creating a veteran-friendly campus: Strategies for transition and success: New directions for student services* (Vol., 26, pp. 5–14). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- American Council on Education. (2011). *Toolkit for veteran-friendly institutions*. Retrieved from <https://vetfriendlytoolkit.acenet.edu/academic-services/Pages/Veteran-Specific-Courses.aspx>
- Armstrong, K., Best, S., & Domenici, P. (2005). *Courage after fire: Coping strategies for troops returning from Iraq and Afghanistan and their families*. Berkeley, CA: Ulysses.
- Berrett, D. (2011, April 8). Words from wartime. *Inside Higher Ed*.
- Burnett, S. E., & Segoria, J. (2009). Collaboration for military transition students from combat to college: It takes a community. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 22, 53–58.
- Church, T. E. (2009). Returning veterans on campus with war related injuries and the long road back home. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 22, 43–52.

- Cloos, C. (2015). *The experiences of veterans with disabilities during their enrollment at a four-year university*. Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. UMI (3684952)
- Cook, B. J., & Kim, Y. (2009). *From soldier to student: Easing the transition of service members on campus*. Washington DC: American Council on Education. Retrieved from <http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Pages/From-Soldier-to-Student.aspx>
- DiRamio, D., & Jarvis, K. (2011). *Veterans in higher education: When Johnny and Jane come marching to campus*. Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass.
- DiRamio, D., & Spires, M. (2009). Partnering to assist disabled veterans in transition. *New Directions for Student Services*, 126, 81–88. doi:10.1002/ss.319
- Dirkx, J. M. (1998). Transformative learning in the practice of adult education: An overview. *PAACE Journal of Lifelong Education*, 7, 1-14.
- Elliott, M., Gonzalez, C., & Larsen, B. (2011). U.S. military veterans transition to college: Combat, PTSD, and alienation on campus. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 48, 279–296. doi:10.2202/1949-6605.6293
- Fischer, H. (2015, August 7). *A guide to U.S. military casualty statistics: Operation Freedom's Sentinel, Operation Inherent Resolve, Operation New Dawn, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation Enduring Freedom*. Congressional Research Service.
- Grasgreen, A. (2012, January 4). Veterans-only classes both expanding and closing. *Inside Higher Ed*.
- Hamrick, F. A., & C. B. Rumann. (2011). Women Service members and Veterans Returning to Colleges and Universities: An Exploratory Analysis. *PowerPlay: A Journal of Educational Justice*, 3, 1–30.
- Hanafin, R. L. (2011). *Clash of cultures: Veterans and non-veterans in academia*. Retrieved from <http://www.veteranstoday.com/2011/08/31/a-clash-of-cultures-veterans-and-non-veterans>
- Hassan, A. M., Jackson, R., Lindsay, D. R., McCabe, D. G., & Sanders, J. E. (2010, May/June). Bottom line: The veteran student in 2010. *About Campus*, 15(2), 30-32. doi:10.1002/abc.20020
- Kato, L. (2010). *The psychological adjustments of veterans returning from Afghanistan and Iraq*. Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. UMI (3426110).
- Kim, Y. M., & Cole, J. S. (2013). *Student veteran/service members' engagement in college and university life and education*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.
- Knowles, M. S. (1980). *The modern practice of adult education: From pedagogy to andragogy*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Kraus, A. & Rattray, N. (2013). Understanding disability in the student veteran community. In F. Hamrick & C. B. Rumann (Eds.). *Called to serve: A handbook on student veterans and higher education*. (pp. 116-137). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Livingston, W. G., Havice, P. A., Cawthon, T. C., & Fleming, D. S. (2011). Coming home: Student veterans' articulation of college re-enrollment. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice* 48, 315–331. doi: 10.2202/1949-6605.6292
- Madaus, J. W. (2009). From the special issue editor. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 22, 2-3.
- Madaus, J. W., Miller, W. K., & Vance, M. L. (2009). Veterans with disabilities in postsecondary education. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 22, 10–17.
- Mezirow, J. (1996). Contemporary paradigms of learning. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 46, 158-172.
- Military One Source. (2015). *2014 demographics: Profile of the military community*.
- National Survey of Student Engagement. (2010). *Major differences: Examining student engagement by field of study*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Education.
- O'Neil, J. M. (1990). Assessing men's gender role conflict. In D. Moore & F. Leafgren (Eds.). *Men in conflict: Problem solving strategies and interventions*. (pp. 22-28). Alexandria, VA: American Association for Counseling and Development.
- Osborne, N. J. (2014). Veteran ally: Practical strategies for closing the military-civilian gap on campus. *Innovative Higher Education*, 39, 247-260. doi:10.1007/s10755-013-9274-z
- Osborne, N. J., Arndt, T. & Coleman, K. (2015). *Life during college: The veteran's guide to success*. Bainbridge Island, WA: College Transition Publishing
- Pollack, W. S. (1998). *Real boys: Rescuing our sons from the myths of boyhood*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Radford, A. (2009). *Military service members and veterans in higher education: What the new GI Bill may mean for postsecondary institutions*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.
- Rumann, C., Rivera, M., & Hernandez, I. (2011). Student veterans and community colleges. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 2011, 51–58. doi:10.1002/cc.457

Shea, K. (2010). *The effects of combat related stress on learning in an academic environment: A qualitative case study*. Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. UMI (3438652).

Strayed, C. (2013). *Wild: From lost to found on the Pacific Crest Trail*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.

Student Veterans of America (2011). *Creating a veteran-friendly campus: A guide for the transitioning student veteran*.

**About the Author**

Nicholas J. Osborne received his B.S. in sociology from Lees-McRae College; his M.A. in sociology from Humboldt State University; and his Ed.D. in educational leadership from the University of California, Davis. He is a former Coast Guard officer and is currently the Director of the Center for Wounded Veterans in Higher Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His research interests include first-year experience programs, student veterans, male community and disability. He can be reached at nosborne@illinois.edu.

Figure 1. Course Framework

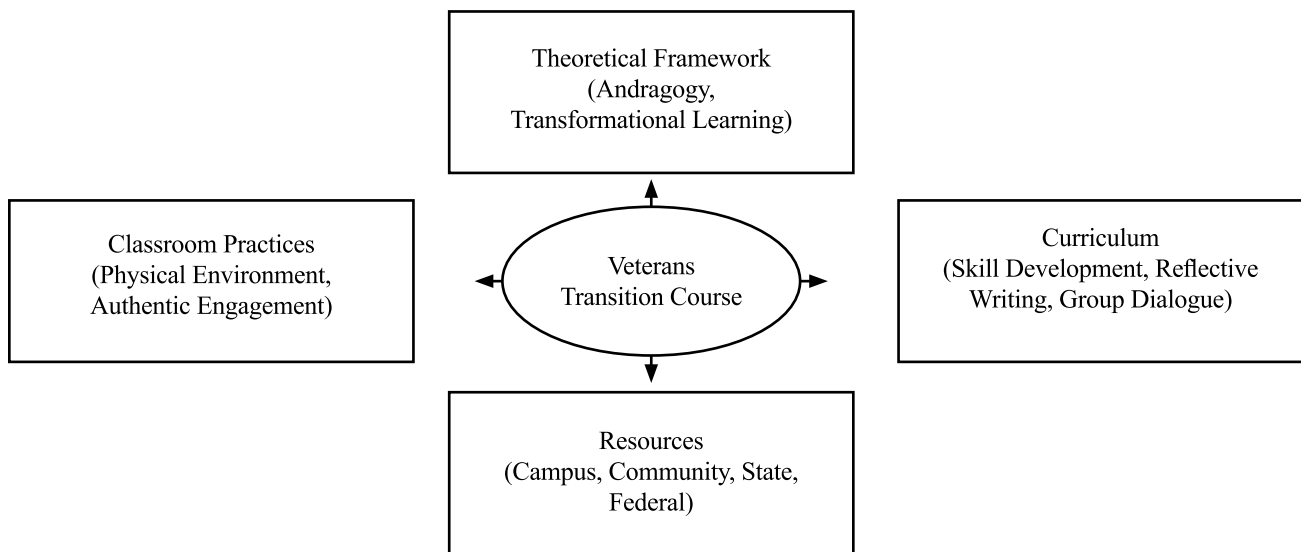


Figure 2. Course Outline

	Associated Themes	Source
Theory		
Andragogy	Self-directed learning; task oriented; assignments have relevance to personal life	Knowles, 1980
Transformational learning	Instructor-student relationship; classroom environment; reflection	Dirkx, 1998; Mezirow, 1996
Men's Studies	Fear of the feminine; boy code	O'Neil, 1990; Pollack, 1998
Directed Readings		
Required Texts	<i>Life during college: The veteran's guide to success;</i> <i>Wild: From lost to found on the Pacific Crest Trail</i>	Osborne, N.J., Arndt, T. and Coleman, K., 2015; Strayed, 2013
Campus Integration		
Out of class requirements	Students assigned a veteran peer-mentor; required to attend two Student Veteran Club meetings	
Classroom Environment		
In-class context	Campus resources orientation; students called me by first name; chairs seated in a circle; class began with a brief check-in where students discussed personal and academic issues affecting them; students used I statements to prevent from speaking on behalf of group or military	
Out of Class Homework		
Assignments	Weekly reflective writing assignments (1-2 pages); presentations; and book essay on wild (5-7 pages)	

*Figure 3. Weekly Prompts*

Weekly Prompts	1-2 pages; turned in for a grade (presentation intentionally vague)
Week 1	Tell us about your military service and what you're studying at the university; fears of being a student, difficult aspects of your transition; academic and personal goals
Week 2	Do you believe that veterans are portrayed accurately in the media? How are veterans misunderstood? What should faculty & staff know about veterans?
Week 3	How can we better educate our campus and community about veterans?
Week 4	What does it mean to live authentically? Are you living an authentic life? What are your gifts? Where are you holding back?
Week 5	What has been the most challenging part of your educational journey and transition at this point? Where are you excelling?
Week 6	Who have been influential allies in your life? When have you encountered fear? What happened? How did you grow from the experience?
Week 7	What is your personal mission? Discuss your immediate and long-term action points for fulfilling your mission. What will your time here at the university contribute?
Week 8	Do you feel limited by social representations of masculinity? What do you do to manage this? Are you the person you hoped you'd become?