

Student Veterans: Advantages and Obstacles in College Transition

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This article explores advantages and obstacles student veterans face in transitioning to an academic setting. Focus groups were conducted with student veterans to explore their interactions with students, faculty, and administrators. Emergent themes included advantages such as maturity, focus, and strength of camaraderie with fellow student veterans. The primary obstacle was difficulty blending in with civilians. These themes are discussed as they compared to previous research and for ways that ongoing dialogue with our student veterans can enhance supportive practices.

An influx of student veterans to college campuses is evident following the launch of the Post 9/11 GI Bill in August 2009. The number of veterans using education benefits has more than doubled in the past 10 years (Veterans Affairs, 2012). The impact of this new generation of student veterans is already unfolding on college campuses. As the Rhode Island College campus experienced a gradual yet steady increase in student veterans, we found it important to understand their transition from the military to college in order to provide a supportive environment.

Military Background of Student Veterans

Much of the literature focusing on student veterans coming to college campuses emphasizes disability services that support the transition to college (e.g., Church, 2009). This focus can be attributed to the significant influences combat-related experiences have had on military service members. The health needs of those who have served are significant, and reintegration into civilian life can result in psychosocial adjustment problems of family strain, occupational stress, and financial stress (Gutierrez & Brenner, 2009). Unfortunately, our attention is often drawn to such factors due to the negative impact these experiences can have on student veterans' opportunities for success in college.

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What may be overlooked in this perspective is that military service may have included combat for some; however, all service members share extensive preparation for the occupational and technical skills necessary for military service. Professional soldiers are described as those who have gone through specialized training and acquired skills that prepare them to provide services to the state (Caforio, 2006). Military values and structures emphasize collective goals, and military culture emphasizes belongingness with loyalty underscored at all levels (Winslow, 1998). In some respects, the military training of a professional soldier can be characterized as an indoctrination process in which civilian men and women are transformed into service members. A primary goal of this military training is to change civilian men and women into part of the collective group that shares a unique identity, learning to subordinate self-interests to view themselves in collective terms (McGurk, Cotting, Britt, & Adler, 2006). These two conditions of collective mindset and specialized training combine as integral components of military identity.

Framework for Focus Groups

Taken together, both combat experiences and influences of military identity are involved in understanding student veteran adjustment to college. Recent military-to-college studies examined the adjustment process, emphasizing that veterans who become students represent a population with special needs deserving of individualized services (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). In developing focus groups for our campus, we recognized the complexities of a military background as diverse contextual factors in which veteran development occurred (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). Further, our framework within which student veteran adjustment to college could be viewed acknowledges both strengths and weaknesses individuals bring to college transition (Schlossberg, 2011).

Method

The Campus and Participants

Rhode Island College is a small state college campus in New England with combined undergraduate and graduate enrollment of 9000. Most students are in-state residents (88%), and 36% of the students are enrolled part time. Approximately one quarter (23%) of the undergraduate students are over age 25. The student veterans on campus represented 2% of the student population, and the campus administration was committed to allocating dedicated space and supportive practices to student veterans. A Veterans Resource Center (VRC) on campus opened in November 2009 as an information resource hub. It is staffed by Veterans Administration Work Study students and overseen by a faculty liaison.

The two investigators were broadly involved in state and campus practices

supporting veterans in higher education. We undertook focus groups after over a year of informal interaction with student veterans on campus in order to more formally explore the transition process of student veterans as they interacted with faculty, students, and administrators on our campus. Our shared premise was that the strengths of student veterans can be overlooked when the focus of exploration rests on the challenges they face. Additionally, we were uncertain if the emerging literature on supportive practices for student veterans would all be a good match for the needs of our own campus. Using the student veterans' own perspectives, this article focuses on the advantages and obstacles these student veterans experienced as they transitioned to campus.

Focus groups were conducted with currently enrolled student veterans regarding their transition to college. The participants in these focus groups were seven Caucasian, prior enlisted service members ages 24 to 42 from the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps. There were six undergraduate students and one graduate student with majors in political science, geography, English, philosophy, and counseling. All of the participants had been deployed since 9/11 with length of deployment ranging from 5 to 14 months. Five of the participants had previous college experience.

Results

From focus group transcriptions, we separately then collaboratively identified descriptive labels for the participant responses. Emergent themes from the focus group interviews were then categorized as advantages or obstacles that impact student veterans' transitions to college. Advantages these student veterans had in their transitions include the themes of maturity and focus, based on their unique military experiences, and strength of camaraderie with fellow veterans. One obstacle was difficulty blending with civilians.

As the focus groups began, the unique experiences of the student veterans provided contextual information. They all acknowledged the uniqueness of their backgrounds, they were proud to attribute their skills directly to their military service, and they recognized that their military experiences contributed to their overall abilities. All respondents were combat veterans and had been required to make real-world decisions, often while facing personal dangers. Regarding these distinctions, one veteran commented, "I've commanded people in Iraq, and I had to make decisions that put people's lives at risk—directly." Another participant added, "[I]t's a lot of responsibility for someone early in their career to have." The gravity and intensity of these real-life experiences underscored some of the complex prior experiences of student veterans that set them apart from civilian students. Although they made no direct connection between the intense military responsibilities and their new academic expectations, these experiences add important contextual information for understanding these student veterans in an academic setting.

Advantages

Maturity and focus. Student veterans in these focus groups approached their education with an expectation that it would bring them to the next step in their careers. They expressed a mature focus about their academic pursuits, which they believed made them stand apart from their civilian peers. One participant commented,

I am here for an education and get that little piece of paper that says “I can do whatever I want to do.” That’s what is important to me at this point and there have been very few people I have met that hold that same regard for what school is about.

The student veterans of this focus group held a pervasive opinion that they differed in maturity from traditional college students around them. They identified immaturity issues of their civilian counterparts as annoying and noted the apparent lack of focus and respect that non- veterans displayed in classes: “many kids are texting and screwing around.” The student veterans perceived a less-determined civilian student body that lacked ambition and contrasted profoundly from what they expected of themselves in college. One veteran noted, “the place was nothing but a big party. Education should be what’s going on here.”

These student veterans unanimously noted dedication to their studies and a desire to conduct themselves appropriately in the classroom. Beyond the details of a serious student who puts away the distraction of cellular phones and attends to the lectures in class, they expressed their desire to be active participants in their learning. They appreciated the opportunity of the classroom experience and were determined to make the best of it. One participant described how different he was from other “timid” civilian students around him in class:

...[W]hen someone in the military asks you a question, you answer it...If you don’t know it, you say I don’t know or don’t answer it. But if you ask a question and you know the answer, you answer it. So my teacher asks these questions all the time and I raise my hand and answer it.

Camaraderie. The general consensus of these respondents was that veterans on campus were seeking solidarity from other student veterans. The commonality of being a veteran and a student seemed to bridge differences of unit, branch, or combat service. After one respondent mentioned a newly formed student veteran group on campus, others agreed that the group helped them feel less isolated within the college community. They acknowledged the comfort they felt in the group and considered it an important place for veterans to meet others who share similar experiences. There was general agreement that meeting other veterans informally in courses was good, and it was also helpful for them to have the student group for being with students with similar backgrounds.

Military service involves an intense connection to other service members, and the transition to an academic setting can mean a sense of loss of connection. There was agreement amongst all respondents that they preferred to seek out other student veterans whenever possible:

I didn’t interact with them (civilian students) at all. There was I think,

maybe...three veterans in my classes. Them I talked to because we had something in common. If nothing else we can swap war stories. The other students I don't interact with at all. Maybe it's just me.

Others agreed with this experience. Another student commented, "I go to class and go home. Unless you're another veteran or someone in my class, I am not going to get involved."

Separated by both their age and life experiences, the participants of this study did not relate to the younger students on campus very well. They noted a perceived segregation and felt like outsiders, especially in an atmosphere where the other students appeared disrespectful and didn't seem to care about their education. Generally, the student veterans in these focus groups did not see in other non-military students the maturity and drive that compelled them to be successful in their education. This distinct separation from other traditional age, non-student veterans is seen in one respondent's comments about being in college:

... it wasn't exactly what I expected. I think the toughest part about it was sitting in the classroom and looking around and I was surrounded by 17-18 year olds that they just got out of high school with little to no life experience and they are here for partying. That's pretty much what everyone talks about... and I kind of felt segregated myself.

The student veterans saw strength in themselves in what they had gained from their combat and non-combat experiences, often using that to resolve differences with others. When describing what contributed to positive experiences on campus, they unanimously identified an underlying component of camaraderie. One respondent noted he wanted to go back to a normal life and connected that to belongingness with other veterans:

Veterans are disconnected from people and a lot of them won't interact with other veterans that weren't in their unit. We need to start communicating with each other and getting together and fighting for us as veterans...We need to get together to do that.

Another respondent agreed that solidarity as students was helpful for him in transitioning to campus: "[w]e stuck together while we were in the service and we need to do that again. We all need to do it together."

Obstacles

Difficulty blending in. When discussing their transition to an academic atmosphere, the respondents described it as a concerted effort to blend in. While prideful of their military experiences, they recognized that these experiences also made them stand apart from others, and they all agreed they were striving to be like any student. When asked if their transition would be smoother with veterans only courses, respondents agreed that "segregating us would be the worst thing to do." A respondent described a circumstance when he had been identified as a veteran in front of other students and concluded, "[i]t's uncomfortable. So being singled out as a veteran is not the best thing." In this and other reactions, the respondents expressed the desire to fit in without being singled out for their

unique backgrounds.

Several respondents noted reactions from others that puzzled them after they introduced themselves as military veterans. One explained, “[w]e can’t wear something around our necks that says combat veteran,” so he developed ways to describe his situation to others. One common way of dealing with student reactions emerged when student veterans described how they tell their stories. “I have a basic story and different versions I’ll tell people when they ask. Anytime you say you’re a veteran, the first thing people ask is ‘did you go overseas?’ or ‘did you kill anybody?’” These interactions were disturbing for the respondents, and they agreed it happened frequently.

In an effort to blend in, student veterans seldom highlighted their previous service to the civilians around them. They were selective in choosing what to tell the civilian public about previous military experience. They decided to keep this part of themselves private until a particular reason to speak up emerged. Only then did they use a coming out story to respond to the prying. One veteran noted,

I won’t announce it in class or anything. When you first start classes every semester, I won’t say anything. I’ll keep it extremely brief but sometimes it comes up in classroom situations. I had it come up in a few classes when we were talking about stuff and something comes up and they say something’s that’s not right or not the way it really is. I’d ask “how do you know” and at that point I tell them.

Other efforts to blend in the campus environment were evident when respondents described their subdued reactions to faculty lectures. One respondent stated, “Some professors have kind of thrown it out there that they don’t agree with the current or past administration’s war. It’s been a lot of ... ‘Bush Bashing’ by professors, not in a passive aggressive way, but something.” While a faculty member’s intent may be to voice opinions about government policy or stir up discussion in class, such statements regarding the military seemed to have negative effects on some respondents. Other comments from student veterans suggested they were sensitive to war references and that classroom climate is affected by professors’ approaches to their lectures. In most cases, the student veterans remained silent about their reactions. One participant noted,

I hear a lot of viewpoints of how people feel about the war. I don’t want to hear about their views because I am proud of what I did and proud of my service. Now I am here to get an education, that shouldn’t make any difference.

Additionally, student veterans did not want to volunteer to be the spokesperson for all military topics, although some saw themselves as a voice of truth about military engagements and war-related efforts. One student stated he wanted to be treated like everyone else, especially with faculty: “I am a student here and it doesn’t matter what I have done in the past or what I am currently doing. It’s my own business. I should be treated as any other student.” Overall, the desire to blend in and be treated like other students was tested by their pride in representing the military in discussions. Many internalized their reactions while, in the classroom, choosing to remain quiet or at least respectfully neutral, especially

when their opinions were divergent from the faculty member.

Underlying all of these responses, the focus group participants expressed the desire to be recognized for their uniqueness without being called upon to stand separately from other students. Regarding how he was treated by faculty, one participant said,

I don't need to be either praised or persecuted for what I have done...At the same time, it would be nice to see more in the middle. No professor has pulled me to the side and after class to ask if there is anything they need to do for you; is there any special consideration?

This and other statements emphasize a dichotomy of wanting to blend in while being uncomfortable bringing attention to their military identity. There was a general reticence for any self-disclosure with faculty, even when challenges arose in classroom participation. Regarding his need to excuse himself during an anxiety attack, one participant noted,

I had an experience with a teacher...She talked to us as children. This was right after my last deployment and two months afterwards I was in school so I had a lot of anxiety problems and she was real stiff about being in class and if you missed three classes she would fail you. So one day I was having an anxiety attack and I got up and walked out of class and left. The following week I tried to explain it to her and asked "please don't count this as one of my absences. I was having an anxiety attack and I just had to get out of school."

Only when faced with a situation in which he needed to protect his academic standing did this respondent mention his veteran status. Others agreed they had faced similar situations and concluded they found it more comfortable to keep such information private.

Discussion

There are several ways in which the emergent themes of these focus groups are similar to previous observations about the student veteran transition to college, despite differences between our campus and the large research universities of previous studies (e.g. DiRamio et al., 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). These similarities are primarily seen in the themes of maturity, camaraderie, and difficulty blending in. These findings are discussed in ways they add to our understanding of student veterans on our campus.

Previous generations of student veterans have been characterized as responsible, mature, successful, and highly focused in their academic programs (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009), and these focus group participants seem to be forging a similar approach. Respondents in these focus groups resembled other studies in which veterans expressed an eagerness to learn, while emphasizing that education is meaningful for them (Byman, 2007). Similarly, the perceived contrast in levels of maturity of civilian peers has been noted as an important theme that colors the academic experience of student veterans (DiRamio et al., 2008; Zinger & Cohen, 2010).

With little in common with their civilian peers, these respondents expressed

a desire to seek solidarity and support from fellow veterans. They seldom socialized with civilian students and primarily sought opportunities to be with other student veterans. This method of being socially comfortable resembled previous findings about blending in (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009), in which the respondents did not bring attention to their military service, discussing it publicly only when they deemed it appropriate. Blending in this way meant avoiding uncomfortable probing about their military background and, in fact, was quite difficult for these respondents. It diminished interactions in which civilians asked, "Did you kill someone?" Such highly personal and disturbing questions are surprisingly not uncommon (Ackerman et al., 2009).

Blending in during classroom interactions meant these respondents avoided clashes with stereotypically liberal faculty who contrasted their more conservative military viewpoints (DiRamio et al., 2008). The respondents were opposed to the marginalizing dynamic that faculty created when they inappropriately disclosed a veteran's status or regarded them as spokespersons for all veterans (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). All of the student veterans in this study expressed a complex mix of desiring acknowledgement of their veteran status with understanding of them as a student population (DiRamio et al., 2008).

The similarities of these findings to previous research enhance our understanding of student veterans at our college and reinforce our efforts to incorporate several veteran-friendly policies on our campus. There is one important exception: we are not developing separate courses or sections for veterans only. Contrary to other campuses where developing veteran only classes is meeting success (Alvarez, 2008), these respondents felt separate from civilian students but did not want to be isolated; they recognized their uniqueness due to life-changing military experiences but did not want to be treated differently from others. They were pleased, on one hand, when they were not put on the spot to represent the military point of view in a class discussion. Conversely, every student veteran mentioned at least one unique characteristic that they wished civilians were aware of in order to better appreciate their situations. We understand better now that the student veterans of these focus groups wished to be recognized for their uniqueness while still being treated like other students.

Limitations

The small sample, with only male combat veterans and most with some prior college experience, limits how we can generalize these results. The use of these themes to shape our campus policies must be undertaken cautiously. The experiences of these few student veterans immediately following the launch of the Post 9/11 GI Bill do not serve as the voice for the increasing numbers of military service members coming to our campus. Understood within these limitations, we have recognized the importance of periodically asking our student veterans for their perspective on supportive services that guide their successful transition to campus.

Conclusion

The emergent themes of these focus groups revealed a transition process for student veterans, influenced by both combat and other military experiences. Although combat experiences made it difficult for them to be comfortable socially with students and faculty, their pervasive military identity served as a support with its strong connection to fellow veterans. Incorporating this military background of both combat and noncombat experiences allowed us to recognize the advantages and obstacles some student veterans faced as they transitioned to college.

A few commonly cited examples of veteran-friendly policies have proven useful to our campus efforts to support the transition from military service member to student veteran. We have created a central information hub for veterans, the students have developed a student veteran organization, and we disperse information regarding veterans' issues to faculty and staff (e.g., American Council on Education, 2012). We are striving to find a balance between creating an environment for student veterans to blend in, while also recognizing their unique military identities. Our efforts to hold periodic veterans' panels open to the campus community have seemed to strike that chord so far. When invited to discuss their military backgrounds in this type of setting, student veteran reaction has been positive, with many suggestions for more events to "spread the word."

These focus groups enhanced our understanding of the transition process of our campus veterans and highlighted their insistence to be treated like other students. With this distinction from previous research findings, in which segregated course sections were recommended, we are reminded to periodically ask for our student veterans' perspectives. Our future focus will be to maintain a close connection to student veteran voices through polling, surveys, and focus groups, in which their opinions are sought and incorporated into supportive transition policies.

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