

Better Transitions for Troops: An Application of Schlossberg's Transition Framework to Analyses of Barriers and Institutional Support Structures for Student Veterans

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ABSTRACT

“Schlossberg’s transition theory is used to frame qualitative analysis of narratives from veterans, administrators, and student affairs professionals, examining whether and how institutions can influence veterans’ transitions to higher education. Findings suggest how institutional structures assist students in developing navigational strategies, as well institutional actions and policies that pose transitional challenges.”

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- Recent research on post 9/11 veterans suggests that entering college can be one of the most difficult aspects of transitioning out of the military. While some scholars have suggested practical steps and strategies to help veterans transition to college and find support, little research has been done to better understand this process.
- Schlossberg’s transition theory is a helpful tool to better understand student veterans’ experiences. This theory suggests that having access to four kinds of resources can help people make better transitions: receipt of caring and affirmation (support), enacting behaviors that shift how problems are seen (strategies), the internal skills an individual has that can help with coping (self), and having a sense of control over what is happening (situation).
- This study examines how different types of institutions of higher education (IHEs) provide resources and support to assist veterans with their transition. Griffin and Gilbert also examine the challenges IHEs have encouraging successful transitions.
- Interviews with a sample of 100 students and university personnel from 7 different IHEs revealed: 1) Veterans focused offices, services, and campus advocates are perceived as important to a successful student veteran transition. In addition, it is critical that campus professionals and leaders have adequate training and empathy, understanding the issues and concerns of student veterans. 2) IHEs must have specific and consistently applied policies and procedures regarding the administration of information on benefits, credit transfer and allocation, and services for veterans. 3) Veterans must be able to leverage support from veteran peers and/or campus officials to make a successful transition. However, this support did not have to come in the form of a veteran students’ association, and must meet an individual veteran’s needs.
- Through the use of Schlossberg’s transition theory, findings from this qualitative study show that initiating a student veteran organization on campus may not be the end all answer to meeting the needs of student veterans; rather, comprehensive efforts to provide students with resources will be most successful in facilitating transitions. Addressing the needs of student veterans requires an approach that addresses each area of the transition, including reaching out to veterans who might be reluctant to self-identify.

IMPLICATIONS

FOR PRACTICE

Given that student veterans expressed an appreciation for a central location they could visit with questions and concerns, universities and colleges should consider opening student veteran offices. University administrators and professionals must understand common challenges veterans face as they enter IHEs, including financial aid, disability, and active off-campus lives. Some student veterans expressed that offices, such as the Bursar's Office and the Registrar's Office, did not communicate consistently or clearly, resulting in issues with benefits, payment of tuition and fees, and allocation of transfer credits. Therefore, offices providing student services should better coordinate. Improving tracking and data management services could promote better coordination, as well as provide new opportunities to identify students and offer them resources and support. Several students voiced frustrations with recognition of their military experiences and acceptance of transfer credits from other IHEs. While acknowledging the difficulty and frustration in this process, some school personnel explained limited credits were accepted because students needed the foundational courses in order to excel in the upper-level courses. Thus, universities should better communicate the reasons behind their credit transfer and allocation decisions. Finally, institutions of higher education should offer more avenues and opportunities for support from peers, faculty, and campus community.

FOR POLICY

Currently, the VA offers several veteran support groups, including rehabilitation and transitional support. To ensure student veterans receive necessary support, the VA might offer additional support groups for veterans pursuing degrees. IHEs without student veteran centers cited the reason for not having a center was limited funding. To ensure users of the post-9/11 GI Bill receive adequate support on college campuses, federal and state policymakers might provide additional financial support to institutions that are struggling to offer a student veteran office/center. Offering such funding could allow cash-strapped schools to provide student veterans beneficial services and implement tracking systems.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Given that this work is qualitative, the findings are not generalizable. It is important to note that student veterans' experiences can vary, and future studies should examine whether these findings are consistent when data are analyzed by race, sex, income level, sexual orientation, and other demographic factors. In this study, student veterans' experiences and concerns sometimes varied by the type of institution they were currently attending. Considering the role for-profit colleges have on veteran education, future studies should include students and personnel at for-profit schools to gain better understanding of how to support students transitioning into these contexts. Schlossberg's transition theory asserts that a change is only a transition when one views it as a transition. Thus, future researchers must continue to focus on student veterans' perceptions and views on the changes they undergo when pursuing a degree, and how these transitions affect their experiences with IHEs. Also, issues facing student veterans with a disability or impairment should be studied to determine how IHEs can better support students with additional challenges as they transition.

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