

Out from the Shadows: Female Student Veterans and Help-Seeking

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ABSTRACT

“Colleges and universities are devoting resources to support students who have military experience. However, evidence suggests veterans may not be using services. Since resources are available this begs the questions “why not?” and “what are the help-seeking attitudes of veterans for psychological and academic assistance?” It’s also timely to consider female veterans in college. What needs and concerns do they have? Are they different than men? Mixed methods were used to investigate help-seeking attitudes of student veterans, particularly women. One unusual finding revealed attitudes were statistically equal by gender. Three themes emerged from interviews suggesting that experiences and norms of male-dominant military service do shape women’s attitudes toward seeking help. A graphical conceptual framework for understanding findings and discussion of implications are provided.”

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- Using a mixed methods approach, the authors investigate help-seeking attitudes of student veterans, particularly women. Investigating the help-seeking attitudes of women student veterans is critical to understanding whether the resources institutions of higher education (IHEs) offer adequately address the achievement needs of women student veterans.
- This study explored what happened when women veterans brought responsibility, worth, and pride, three military-cultural contexts, to their transition to civilian life and help-seeking attitudes in college. Campus climate was evaluated in three dimensions: psychological, behavioral, and structural. The researchers found that some military cultural contexts matched the dimensions of the campus climate, such as misperceptions of women veterans. However cognitive development on campus opposed the dualistic thinking associated with military experience.
- Help-seeking attitudes did not significantly differ by gender. However, military culture and values do shape how and if women student veterans will seek help. For example, pride (a military-cultural context) often resulted in women student veterans most in need of help not seeking help.
- College professionals and others should use the matching and opposing elements to better understand the help-seeking attitudes of women veterans who have military experience. Understanding these elements could help when designing programs and services to assist women with military experience who are attending an IHE.

IMPLICATIONS

FOR PRACTICE

Student veterans often exhibit components of military culture, such as “unit mentality.” Student veterans exhibiting such components should use these military cultural components to their benefit. For example, application of unit mentality can help create a sense of community with student veterans supporting each other. Student veterans struggling to adjust to the type of thinking often required of college students should feel comfortable seeking support at their university student veteran center. Student veterans and student veteran counselors might discuss strategies for adjusting to civilian and college life, such as joining student veteran peer groups. University staff working with student veterans should be mindful of the differences in military culture and college culture, and offer guidance when necessary. A difference some student veterans might appreciate guidance on is individualism (in college) and conformity (military). Since many women student veterans might not seek out help, even if they are struggling with the transition to academia, counselors and other university professionals who serve student veterans should consider asking student veterans specific questions about their transition to assist both male and female student veterans with any difficult adjustments. Student veteran organizations should continue advocating on behalf of veterans on campus, and provide the requisite sense of community that may be missing during a student’s transition from military service to college and civilian life. Since this study found that many student veterans were not aware of the services their institution of higher education (IHE) offered, universities should improve their advertising of available services. IHEs should advertise services to the general student body since some women student veterans do not readily access veteran resources. To allow student veterans to become further engaged and involved at their school, IHEs should consider offering childcare services for student veterans with children.

FOR POLICY

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) might continue offering their campus toolkit, which has been found to be a great resource for many IHEs, offering them guidance on the unique experiences and needs of today’s student veterans. The VA might consider offering additional education and training on addressing the needs of student veterans during the trainings offered to university and college officials on VA educational benefits. The VA might continue forming partnerships with IHEs to help IHEs determine which resources are necessary for their specific population of student veterans. The VA and IHEs might create initiatives to increase on campus employment opportunities for student veterans.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This mixed methods study has several limitations. A limitation of this study is that much of the interview data did not neatly fit with the three theme findings of responsibility, worth, and pride, as key factors in understanding the phenomenon of women veterans in college nor their help-seeking attitudes. Since the prevalence of the underlying themes were not established, this study might not be applicable to all women veterans attending an IHE. Future researchers might improve generalizability of their study by using a grounded theory. Another limitation of this study is that only 26% of the student veterans included in the sample identified as women. To ensure the important attitudes and experiences of women veterans are detected, future studies investigating the help-seeking attitudes of women student veterans should oversample women student veterans. The response rate of this sample was 11%. Though 11% is considered typical for internet surveys, this study might be limited by volunteer bias. This study might also be limited by recall bias and self-report bias since data was collected retrospectively and self-reported. Future researchers might conduct cross-sectional and longitudinal studies to reduce recall bias. More research is needed on best practices for student veterans, especially women student veterans. Researchers should continue examining how universities can encourage student veterans to seek help, while also reducing barriers and stigma associating with accessing help. Studies are needed on effective ways for IHEs to communicate available resources to both male and female student veterans.

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