

Accommodating Veterans with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder Symptoms in the Academic Setting

PUBLICATION: *Rehabilitation Education* (2010); 24 (1&2), 43-55.

PUBLICATION TYPE: Peer-Reviewed Journal Article

KEYWORDS: Veterans, war, combat, readjustment, classroom accommodations

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS:

- Researchers examined specific barriers to education in a sample of seven student veterans, which included veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Four common themes emerged regarding the challenges these veterans face, including professional adjustment issues, social interactions, behavioral and emotional challenges and life changes.
- Student veterans' feelings of isolation and negative experiences, such as witnessing the death of a fellow service member, impeded their ability to focus on their education and form relationships with colleagues.
- Student veterans' also felt severe anxiety when asked by students and faculty about their military experiences, specifically questions about having killed people. These anxieties negatively impacted Student veterans' view of their ability to succeed in higher education.

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ABSTRACT:

“Iraq veterans were asked to describe readjustment difficulties following their return from combat service. A qualitative analysis addressed four themes (professional concerns, social interactions, behavioral and emotional challenges and changing life views) relevant to post-service classroom adjustment. Recommendations for educational accommodations are provided based upon review of the literature and qualitative data analysis.”

Implications

FOR PRACTICE

Although based on a small sample of student veterans, this study highlights significant challenges for veterans pursuing higher education, including those of student veterans with PTSD. Many veterans attending colleges and universities may have difficulty in the areas of professional adjustment, social interaction, behavioral and emotional challenges and life changes. Student veterans expressed impairments in developing close relationships, concerns about feelings of isolation, and heightened anxiety when asked insensitive questions about their military service. Student veterans expressed that they felt school and life in general were unchallenging compared to military service, which may have furthered their isolation from civilian life. College and university administrators should take steps to educate faculty and students to work effectively with student veterans, especially those with PTSD. Implementing seminars and campus-wide awareness programs can increase awareness and sensitivity to these issues; more specified faculty training for professors and school counselors will ensure that they are aware of the issues student veterans face on campus. Professors should refrain from volunteering student veterans to share their military experiences, unless student veterans are comfortable doing so. Colleges and universities can take steps to effectively educate faculty, staff and the student body, and should do so for the benefit of their student veterans, faculty and staff members.

FOR POLICY

Many veterans in this study expressed confusion about college enrollment processes, specifically in the area of military benefits for education. Veterans indicated that courses from the military which were expected to transfer were either not accepted for college credit, or the transfer process was difficult to complete. In addition, many veterans commented on confusion about the benefits afforded them by the G.I. Bill. Colleges and universities should work with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to provide clear explanations and criteria for benefits, including acknowledgment of any enrollment costs which may not be covered. Policy makers may wish to fund initiatives targeting the distribution of college-specific information relevant to veterans. Educational policies regarding course transferability may need to be revisited as well, so that veterans seeking to further their education can take steps to do so both during and after their military service without repeating coursework. Colleges and universities may also need to examine their student health and counseling policies to be sure that student veterans are included. While many colleges and universities have policies and standards for students with disabilities, student veterans with PTSD can fall outside this range of services. By including student veterans with PTSD in more specialized services, universities can ensure that all students receive any assistance they may need.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future studies should utilize both qualitative and quantitative data collection to explore the challenges faced by student veterans, as this study relied solely on qualitative data. Due to the small sample size in this qualitative study, the generalizability of the results is limited. Future studies should also focus on gathering data from a more diverse group of student veterans, and reducing any response bias. Although the researchers contacted the VA and other organizations for participants, some of the participants in this study knew the researchers, which could lead to possible bias in the results. In addition, because researchers used focus groups and in-person interview questionnaires, respondents could have delivered more socially-desired responses or withheld some of their experiences. Further research in this area, using a variety of both qualitative and quantitative research methods, can be greatly beneficial to veterans pursuing higher education.

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