Women Service members and Veterans Returning to Colleges and Universities: An Exploratory Analysis

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS:

- As women's presence in the military increases, researchers are delving into how their deployment and post-deployment experiences compare to those of their male counterparts. Although women report higher incidences of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), sexual harassment and sexual abuse, there is a scarcity of on-campus resources specifically for women veterans who attend colleges and universities after service.

- Researchers found women veterans to have relationship and identity transitions after service that were significantly different from those of male service members, often marked by the hyper-masculinity of military culture and gender stereotypes.

- Colleges and universities should aim to increase the availability of campus-based counseling services, disability services and other resources specifically for women veterans. Increasing visibility for women veterans through campus forums could also increase visibility, respect and support for women veterans on campus.

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ABSTRACT:

"Women comprise increasing shares of the active duty military ranks as well as guard and reserve membership, and colleges and universities are consequently enrolling larger numbers of women veterans who seek to utilize their earned education benefits. Ensuring that student veterans — and women veterans — are well served by colleges and universities entails greater understanding of demographic changes, duty and deployment experiences, transition experiences, and negotiations of complex social identities."

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Implications

FOR PRACTICE

Women veterans, especially those who are students, need additional social support during their transitions to civilian life and life on campus. Women and student veterans should also make use of any available on-campus resources to establish connections with other veterans attending the same university for support. Likewise, colleges and universities should increase the supports available to women veterans and service members on campus so that they have adequate access to services including, but not limited to, academic counseling, vet centers, disability services, health care and peer support. Campus-based services, such as counseling services and disability services, offered to female service members and veterans should be cognizant of the issues women veterans and service members might encounter. Universities and colleges should establish or continue supporting student veteran organizations, especially those enabling women veterans and service members to serve a leadership role and have their voices heard by multiple audiences. Universities and colleges should designate spaces where veterans can informally meet on campus, allowing for the option of having a separate place for women veterans, as some women veterans may feel more comfortable in these spaces. Universities and colleges should also consider forming alliances with nearby higher education institutions, community groups, and guard/reserve units to create places for women service members and veterans to share advice and perspectives, receive available information on relevant resources, and reduce feelings of isolation. Finally, universities and colleges should invite speakers and host forums related to veteran and service member concerns which specifically allocate time for women veterans and service members to share their deployment and service experiences. Realizing the potential difficulties many women student veterans or service members encounter in their pursuit of a degree, family members should aim to be as educated on veterans' issues and as supportive of women veterans and service members as possible.

FOR POLICY

When creating and revisiting policies on acclimating service members back to civilian life, policymakers may wish to increase the visibility and participation of women veterans so that the concerns of this population are addressed. U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) and U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) officials might host open forums where women veterans and current service members can honestly share their experiences to improve educational and health policies. Some policies may need to be revisited to ensure they are up to date with the issues female service members are encountering upon transitioning back to civilian life. DoD policymakers might consider implementing additional sources of counseling for returning service members who are negotiating military and civilian identities. DoD policymakers could also revisit policies on missions to ensure equal treatment and participation, regardless of gender.

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FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There is a growing need for research on women's experiences in the military and the way in which gender dynamics influence other life factors during and after service. Researchers should collect data from all service members on multiple issues, including childcare management and the impact of deployment on parenting, and compare the findings by gender. There is also a need for research exploring how civilian perceptions on women in the military impact women veterans' transitions to civilian life, particularly when civilian perceptions devalue the work of the female service member. Researchers should aim to collect data from diverse groups of women service members and veterans, across age groups and military service branches, including military training, deployment and transitions to civilian life after service.