

## Examining the Lived Experience and Factors Influencing Education of Two Student Veterans Using Photovoice Methodology

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### ABSTRACT

**“OBJECTIVE.** We sought to understand the lived experience of 2 student veterans and identify factors influencing their higher education.

**METHOD.** A qualitative research design was used with 2 student veterans who engaged in photovoice methodology. We analyzed their photographs, accompanying narratives, and discussion session transcripts using descriptive coding and thematic analysis.

**RESULTS.** Data analysis revealed four themes: (1) reminiscence of past duty and reflections on military life, (2) transition from military life to civilian student life, (3) entry to a new stage of life, and (4) influence of the university and community environment.

**CONCLUSION.** Findings from this study revealed factors influencing student veterans’ education and can be used to develop occupation-based interventions to assist veterans who engage in higher education.”

### RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- Student veterans might face challenges particular to their status, such as physical and mental strains, difficulty with time management, working while in school, caring for dependents, searching for and accessing healthcare, and establishing or continuing social relationships. Despite the challenges, many veterans attribute their educational success to their military experience and training. This study aims to collect data on how the military experience influence student veterans’ engagement in higher education.
- Using photovoice, Tomar and Stoffel seek to determine the factors and support systems that positively and/or negatively influence attainment of educational goals for student veterans. The use of photovoice in this study allows the student veterans to actively participate in dialogue, reflection, and the creation of scientific evidence.
- Participants conveyed being hyper-vigilant during their initial days of transition. They suggested that university officials should be very cautious to consider this as an immediate sign of post-traumatic stress disorder and be thoughtful of their past experiences. Findings suggest that the hyper-vigilance diminished as participants transitioned.
- Findings show that in addition to better access to and efficient outreach of resources, such as tutoring, student veterans would benefit from increased social connection and interaction among student veterans, availability of family care services on campus, assistance during early transition with needs, such as housing and community and university navigation, and employment assistance resources and services.

## IMPLICATIONS

### FOR PRACTICE

Student veterans sometimes have difficulty seeking and accepting help and may perceive that some teaching staff and university officials are unaware of their experiences. Student veterans should still seek and accept help from university faculty and staff and, at the same time, universities should ensure that both faculty and staff are aware of student veterans' common needs and challenges. Given the possibility that some student veterans may struggle adjusting to campus life, universities should have counselors and staff who are familiar with student veterans' mental health needs. This study also reaffirmed the multi-dimensional experience of student veterans that would greatly benefit university communities – universities, thus, should engage student veterans in leadership roles. Data analysis also highlighted that student veterans yearn for a sense of camaraderie, particularly during their initial days of transition. Accordingly, universities should facilitate immediate social connection with existing student veterans through student veteran organization/s

### FOR POLICY

Beyond increased collaboration related to student veteran needs generally, the VA and universities might expand their partnership to ensure the availability of crucial resources for student veterans, including employment services. Given that many student veterans have familial duties, the VA might offer additional services to full-time student veterans, such as daycare and after-school care. Policymakers might also considering developing nationwide training programs to familiarize universities with the needs and goals of student veterans. Policymakers might also consider providing support to the creation of student veteran centers on college campuses.

### FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Given only two participants, it is difficult to generalize these findings to all student veterans or conclude that these themes fully capture the student veteran experience. Future studies should include student veterans of other races, ethnicities, and age groups. Participants were asked to participate in six sessions that each ranged from 1.5 to 2 hours. Future researchers might reduce the time commitment of the sessions to reduce the time constraints this study posed for some interested participants. Peer-to-peer discussion did not occur in two of the six sessions due to one of the two participants being absent. The absence of peer-to-peer discussion might have limited idea sharing. Tomar and Stoffel attempted to reduce this limitation by asking questions and providing feedback. Subsequent studies using a group sharing format should hold sessions during times that all participants can attend and form groups of more than two people so that peer-to-peer sharing can occur even if one participant is absent. In addition, both participants were white and in their 20s. Future studies should explore the effect other demographic factors have on student veterans' lived experiences and successes and challenges with their educational attainment goals. Future photovoice studies should include faculty and staff professionals to help them become more aware of student veterans' concerns and challenges.

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