

Understanding Transition Experiences of Combat Veterans Attending Community College

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ABSTRACT

“The majority of research concerning student veterans has been conducted at the university level, with minimum analysis performed at the level where the vast majority of returning veterans attend school: the community college. While some research has discussed what services colleges and universities should offer returning veterans, little research has been conducted on understanding the actual experiences of veterans making the transition from service member to college student. A group of varied gender and racial backgrounds took part in an effort to describe the lived experiences of combat veterans making the transition into community college after active military service. Findings include the inadequacy of current models for use in understanding student-veteran transition experiences, particularly at the community college, and the discovery that the majority of student veterans involved in this study do not take part in on-campus programs specifically designed for them. The experiences of military veterans who enroll in community colleges subsequent to deployment in a combat environment since 11 September 2001 have not been adequately researched and remain misunderstood (Ewing, 2011; Gomez, 2011; Karni, 2011; Wood, 2011). Existing models of student transition used to describe the student-veteran experience are largely inadequate and framed around traditional 4-year colleges and universities. As a result, higher education stakeholders may not have the necessary information to effectively assist this growing student demographic. Further research will increase the body of knowledge in this important area and, it is hoped, lead to more effective educational policies regarding student veterans.”

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- Almost half (43%) of all veterans pursuing a degree start at a community college. However, there is a lack of scholarly literature on the experiences of student veterans enrolled in community colleges. To address this gap, Jones interviewed five (5) recently deployed student veterans attending a two-year community college in Florida.
- The current model (Schlossberg’s theory of transition) used to measure student veteran success in academic settings consists of four (4) elements: general support, services, academic interactions, and transition support. Jones argues that this model overlooks social aspects necessary for effective transitions back into civilian and academic environments. Jones proposes applying Vacchi’s model of student veteran support to Schlossberg’s theory of transition. Applying Vacchi’s model will allow for a two-tiered model that includes the impact of an individual’s experiences on their academic success (microsystem) and the impact of interactions with family, friends, veterans, and civilians on academic success (mesosystem).
- Through the interviews, Jones identified several common themes that negatively impact student veterans’ higher education experience at community colleges: limited understanding of higher education procedures, negative interactions with college staff, voluntary disengagement from other student veterans, difficulty transitioning to non-regimented classroom environments, and feelings of frustration during interactions with traditional college students. Jones also found that family support positively influenced student veterans’ higher education experience.
- Given the expected increase of veterans entering higher education, more research is needed on successful integration of student veterans. It might be beneficial to examine other factors that positively influence the higher education experience of student veterans.



IMPLICATIONS

FOR PRACTICE

To help student veterans acclimate to college and learn of resources available to them, institutions of higher education (IHEs) should consider offering a veteran-specific orientation to newly accepted and enrolled student veterans. To improve relations between veteran students and nonveteran students, IHEs should offer nonjudgmental spaces for each to share their experiences and provide support. Considering that many of the student veterans interviewed expressed that family support was integral to their success in school, IHEs should consider inviting families to attend social events, such as orientations and mixers. To improve interactions between student veterans and campus staff, IHEs that serve student veterans should consider having a dedicated office to help student veterans navigate their higher education experience. In addition to offering academic support and advising, the dedicated office should offer job training and financial aid assistance. IHEs should consider offering trainings to their faculty and staff on military culture. Offering military culture trainings could allow both faculty and staff to learn about student veterans in general, and factors that might affect student veteran success in the classroom, such as multiple commitments outside of school.

FOR POLICY

To help student veterans better understand their benefits, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) might collaborate with IHEs to offer walk-in clinics for student veterans to ask questions about their GI Bill benefits. During these walk-in clinics, the VA and IHEs might provide information on additional sources of financial aid available at specific schools, including the Yellow Ribbon Program. In addition to the collaboration with IHEs, the VA might offer trainings on how veterans can use their GI Bill through its website. Offering online trainings might help the VA reach more veterans, including those located in rural areas. Considering some veterans expressed difficulty selecting a college and enrolling in college, the VA might encourage IHEs that serve student veterans to offer additional enrollment support. To help student veterans select the best college for their educational goals, the VA might expand its educational tips to include selecting the right college. Given the importance of peer support, the VA might offer opportunities for veterans considering pursuing higher education to meet with veterans currently enrolled in an IHE.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

A limitation of this study is that the common themes identified through interviews with student veterans attending a community college in Florida might not represent the experiences of student veterans at other community colleges across the United States. To further understand the experiences of student veterans in higher education, future researchers should include student veterans from other community colleges across the U.S. Another limitation of this study is that all the student veterans interviewed had served in a combat zone during their deployment. Future studies on the experiences of student veterans should include a more diverse sample, including student veterans who did not serve in combat while deployed and students in pre-military programs, such as ROTC. Future studies should include other types of IHEs, including online programs, for-profit universities, and technical schools. Given the impact of interactions on a student veterans' higher education experience, future researchers should examine the impact of less face-to-face interactions for student veterans enrolled in an online school. Future researchers should examine how student veteran organizations affect the transition experience of student veterans, particularly as it relates to student veterans feeling connected.

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