



What Factors Affect The Undergraduate Experiences of Student Veterans?

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ABSTRACT

This study adds to the existing body of knowledge about the university experiences of undergraduate student veterans. Vacchi and Berger's (2014) Model of Student Veteran Support provides the conceptualizing framework that examines a university's efforts to foster the success of student veterans. This study uses qualitative methods to identify factors that support and impede the success of student veterans in higher education. Key findings that could have significant implications for faculty, and higher education administrators are discussed.

Military veterans are enrolling in higher education in record numbers, due in part to military educational benefits available from the federal government (Cook, & Kim, 2009). Most notable is the post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act, popularly known as the GI Bill, which provides tuition assistance and educational benefits to active duty and honorably discharged veterans serving since September 2001 (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015). Despite such financial benefits and support for student veterans, data indicate that veterans still face a number of obstacles in their quest to earn a college education. Several studies (Brown & Gross, 2011; Jones, 2013; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014) indicated that student veterans come with different life experiences than the traditional students (Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014), and have unique needs and challenges that can compromise their ability to succeed academically.

Institutions of higher education must seek to understand the unique characteristics and needs of student veterans and ready themselves to provide support that increases the likelihood of academic success and graduation. According to Murphy (2011), military veterans have not been asked about their needs or how to meet them.

To help fill the void in the existing literature, this exploratory qualitative study reports the university experiences of 21 student veterans and highlights the supportive and impeding factors that they perceive influence their pursuit of higher education. Two questions guide this research:

1. What are the factors that support student veterans in pursuit of an undergraduate education in a university setting?

2. What are the factors that impede student veterans in pursuit of an undergraduate education in a university setting?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Higher Education and Student Veterans

Increased enrollments of student veterans have prompted many higher education institutions to step-up campus support and resources for this growing subpopulation of nontraditional students. For example, some colleges and universities have a Veterans Center, others have specific staff members who work exclusively with active-duty and veterans. Despite these efforts, student veterans reportedly face a number of obstacles to their ability to persist to graduation (Elliott, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2011; Machuca, Torres, Morris, & Whitley, 2014).

Several studies (Brown, & Gross, 2011; Jones, 2013; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014) indicate that this student population grapple with having unique needs and challenges that can hinder their ability to succeed academically. Scholars also point to the importance of assessing the effectiveness of veteran specific support services in enhancing the retention and success of student veterans (Vacchi, & Berger, 2014).

Student Veterans in Higher Education: Perceived Strengths and Challenges

Student veterans enter the classroom with a wide array of life experiences and skill sets that differ from that of the typical, traditional-age college student (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009). An emerging body of literature on the academic experiences of student veterans identifies some of the strengths veterans bring to the classroom: self-reliance, pride, increased confidence, maturity, camaraderie among service members, goal commitment, self-discipline, leadership, and teamwork skills (Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Olsen et al., 2014; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

Veterans also experience challenges: difficulty connecting with nonmilitary peers and adapting to civilian and student life (Schiavone & Gentry, 2014; Tomar & Stoffell, 2012); mental and physical health problems (Norman et al., 2015); financial stressors (Olsen et al., 2014); and credit transfer problems (Brown & Gross, 2011; Ghosh & Fouad, 2015). It is imperative to identify and interpret veterans' perceived impediments and supports if veterans' educational outcomes are to improve (Barry et al., 2014).

Vacchi and Berger's (2014) multidimensional model for student veteran support underscores four key areas where colleges and universities can focus their efforts to support student veterans: (a) services provided to veterans that are adaptable to their unique needs, with an emphasis on quality and timeliness of services; (b) supports to overcome obstacles during transition to school and through degree completion; (c) frequent and intimate academic or faculty interactions; (d) other supports, such as peer advising and general campus support. Bean and Metzner (1985) found that the most important support systems for nontraditional students are those external to the college/university's environment, such as family members, friends, colleagues, current and potential future employers, and community organizations (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). This may mean that support for student veterans may be similar in some regards to that of other nontraditional students, but also calls for hearing from this population about what they consider as supporting and impeding factors.

METHODOLOGY

Recruitment and Data Collection

Several recruitment methods were used to contact student veterans enrolled at a mid-western land grant university including recruitment e-mails and flyers distributed through the campus

Veterans Center, campus libraries, local community centers, and local businesses. Snowball sampling (Patton, 2002) was also used to recruit student veterans. To be eligible to participate in this study, participants had to have formerly served the military, enrolled at the University during the time the study was conducted, and enrolled for at least one semester. Twenty-one student veterans were interviewed during the months of May to November 2015. Interviews lasted 30 to 90 minutes. Participants received a \$50.00 gift card in recognition of their time and contribution.

Academic standing ranged from freshman to upperclassman status ($n=21$). The majority of the participants ($n=16$) were in the first one to four semesters of their studies; two students completed five semesters, of the remaining three students, each completed 6, 7, and 12 semesters respectively; two were transfers students.

General demographics were collected: age, gender, race, military service, and report of disability (Table 1). Minority groups are underrepresented at the University, so it was not surprising that none of the participants identified as African American/Black, Asian American or Native American. A large percentage 71.4% ($n=15$) of the participants reported having a disability. Of that number, 60 % ($n=9$) reported having a disability that impacted mobility, 40 % ($n=6$) reported having a disability related to mental health, and 33.33% ($n=5$) reported having a combination of mobility and mental health challenges.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N=21)

Characteristic	N	%
Ages		
25-30	13	62.0
31-40	5	23.8
41-50	2	9.5
51-60	1	4.7
Gender		
Male	16	76.2
Female	5	23.8
Race/Ethnicity		
White	17	80.9
Hispanic	4	19.1
Branch of Service		
Army	7	33.3
Marine Corps	4	19.1
Navy	5	23.8
Air Force	4	19.1
Unreported	1	4.7
Deployed Overseas		
Yes	17	80.9
No	4	19.1
Combat Exposure		
Yes	13	61.9
No	8	38.1
Length of Active Duty Service		
1-4 yrs	1	4.7
5-8 yrs	15	71.5
9-12 yrs	5	23.8

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis of the data (Boyatzis, 1998) was used to identify overarching factors that influenced participants' academic experience. There were four steps in the data analysis phase. First, each transcript was reviewed at least twice to identify key words and terms reflecting supporting and impeding factors (the preliminary codes). Second, the codes were compared for consistency, contrasted, and refined across all transcripts. Third, revised codes were categorized and grouped into themes. Last, the themes were classified into supporting and impeding factors in keeping with the overarching research questions, and then further grouped into three general categories: (a) Individual factors, (b) noncampus factors, and (c) university/campus factors. Individual factors relate to characteristics unique to the particular participant. Noncampus factors refer to family members, friends, military connections, employment, and other organizations or influences external to the university. University/campus factors refer to all programs and services within the domain of the university, as well as, those student-student peer interactions that occur within the context of, and as a product of, the university experience.

FINDINGS

Data suggest that several factors positively impacted the experiences of the student veterans in their academic pursuits. Data also reveal a number of barriers that impeded academic success.

Supportive Factors

Eight supportive factors were reported. These factors included one individual factor, three noncampus factors, and four university/campus factors (Table 2).

Table 2
Supportive Factors

Supportive Factors		
Individual	Noncampus	University/Campus
1. Military Training and Experience 57.1% (n=12)	2. Family support 61.9% (n =13)	5. Peer interaction 71.4% (n=15)
	3. Post 9/11 GI Bill scholarships and external financial support 100% (n =21)	6. Veterans Centers 76.1% (n=16)
	4. Off-campus military/veteran connections and organizations 71.4 % (n =15)	7. Priority registration and proficient financial aid staff/bursars 76.1 % (n=16)
		8. Helpful academic advisors and professors 57.1% (n=12)

Supportive Individual Factor

Military training and experience

Twelve of the 21 participants identified their military training and experience as a positive factor. Veterans bring unique skills and training experiences, including increased

determination and discipline. Participants also perceived having increased “problem solving” and “critical thinking skills compared with nonveterans students.” A little more than half of the participants believe that their training, positions of responsibility, and professional development are assets that distinguish them from traditional college students. For example, Dan remarked that,

the discipline that you've gained in the military is not found in the general population. ... I have to take a lot more pride in my school work because of it ... and I feel more of an obligation to complete tasks than a lot of my peers do . . . But really I think the biggest thing is the time management piece that I learned, and that structure that you can provide yourself.

Participants also identified leadership and group work as a strength they bring to their education.

Supportive noncampus factors

Family support

Almost 62% of the participants (n=13) emphasized the social supportive role played by various family members, including spouses, partners, parents and children. Participants highlighted the benefit of having family members who understood them and cared about their wellbeing. For instance, Jen stated,

when I got out of the military, I came to the university straight from, basically, Iraq and I enrolled in an undergraduate program. I was here a year. I had difficulties with class, professors, and faculty. Nobody understood, nobody cared ... I married someone who understood and that has made a world of difference.

Similarly, Evan mentioned, “my parents are always a support. Because no one in my family ever went to college, they're really cheering for me, rooting for me.” Other participants mentioned having family members, but did not acknowledge them as sources of support, while two participants declined to talk about support from family hinting at broken relationships.

Post-9/11 GI Bill, scholarships, and other external financial opportunities

All 21 participants were GI Bill recipients; participants highlighted how much they appreciated being able to use their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits and other sources of financial support to attend the university. Some participants were frustrated by the delay in receiving their GI Bill benefits; most however stated that they could not complete college without it. John expressed a common belief, “probably the number one biggest support on campus has to be students receiving their GI bill. And the, overseas combat veteran pay through the State.” Omar also praised the State for providing free tuition and fees for overseas combat veterans who were residents of the state (funding for this support has since been cut). He related that as a transfer student, he exhausted his GI Bill benefits having used some at the other university where he was enrolled. Without the state's financial support, Omar reported he “probably would not be able to finish up” his degree.

Off-campus military/veteran connections and organizations

Support from off-campus military/veteran connections and organizations in the larger military/veterans community was noted by 71.4% of the participants (n=15). Elizabeth stated, “I'm still kind of enmeshed with the military. There's a lot of camaraderie that you establish with fellow military members, to where I still maintain contact with um, a lot of the people that I worked with and that keeps me going in school too.” Eight of these 15 participants identified support from engaging with veteran activities in the community, outside the university setting. Participants felt “safe” at these events because “military folks have a disciplined culture and set

of expectations that I can rely on.” These same eight participants also identified support from military organizations. For example, Peter said, “I have great respect for the VA [Veteran’s Administration] and support it has given me. The VA originally got me into school.” Manny identified the American Legion, “I tend to hang out at the American Legion in (city) and that is really, really awesome. Being surrounded by veterans in a bar is just amazing.” Theo found support at the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), “Um, just to hang out and stuff. I love those Friday night feeds. But at the VFW I’m usually involved about, every other month.”

Supportive University/campus Factors

Student veteran peer interactions

Being around other student veterans was identified as a supportive factor. This factor highlights relationships participants established with other student veterans on the campus who do not use the Veterans Center.

A little over 71% of the participants (n=15) emphasized socializing with other military folks because they speak the same language and have a common understanding that generates comfort and a sense of belonging. Justin described the connection he felt with fellow student veterans as, “really just family. We usually will do anything at just the drop of a hat, just to help out a fellow veteran ... if it’s financial, if it’s relationship, emotional, whatever ... we look after ourselves or after our own.” In support of this point, Manny indicated,

connecting with other military individuals ... is funny because you can instantly share, um, similarities with negative experiences or with positive experiences. It’s one of those things that no matter where you were or how long you served, you’re probably gonna have some very similar things to complain about, or to laugh and joke about. Yeah, maybe just the camaraderie from shared experiences.

Veterans Center

Student veterans also emphasized that access to the Veterans Center was another source of support; the Veterans Center was a place they were sure to connect with other veterans. Seventy-six percent of the participants (n=16) talked about spending time at the Veterans Center and described it as a place where they could be among peers who understood each other. Carl stated, “the ability to go in there [Veterans Center] and associate with other people who have gone through similar experiences, just to blow off steam or BS, has been very rewarding, very positive. I just wished it were a larger space.” Dan offered a slightly different perspective about why he enjoys going to the Veterans Center,

I can’t say enough good things about the Center’s employees and the Veterans Center, and the benefits that they provide. I’m not quite as inclined to want the fellowship part of it, which is a big deal for some people. But you know, the, um, the tutoring and the free food, the social events and the field trips they plan to get us together.

Although deemed in a positive light, a few participants said they were not heavily reliant on the Veterans Center, but were pleased to know that it was available to them. Two participants stated that they were only “peripherally involved” with the Center, and “stopped in occasionally to say hi to the Director”.

Priority registration and proficient financial aid staff

The same 16 participants, who deemed the Veterans Center as a supporting factor, also praised the university’s priority registration for student veterans. Participants surmised that the Veterans Center had an excellent, coordinated working relationship with personnel in the registrar office responsible for priority registration implementation. Priority registration allows military students to register for courses sooner than their nonmilitary peers. Robert

said, "I think the priority military registration where you can register before everybody else, is amazing."

Dedicated staff in the financial aid office to help student veterans enroll, register for classes, and access military educational benefits and other available scholarships was also viewed positively. The above noted 16 participants enthusiastically endorsed the staff members/bursars, noting they worked tirelessly to create a positive experience. Mike stated,

I don't think there's anything more the school could do to make it easier for us to use veterans' benefits. I really don't.

Helpful academic advisors and instructors

More than half of the participants ($n=12$) expressed satisfaction with the support they received from their academic advisors and instructors. Peter said,

it just seems like every time I'm ready to just give up and call it quits, and not come back to school no more, people like ... just encouraged me and they step out and try to make things right for me.

Theo noted, "[Some professors], they just care, legitimately care. And they want you to succeed."

Impeding Factors

Nine factors that student veterans report impeded their pursuit of academic success were identified: five individual factors, two noncampus factors, and two University/campus factors.

Table 3

Impeding Factors

Impeding Factors			
Individual	Noncampus	University/Campus	
9. Financial insecurities 61.9% ($n=13$)	14. Untimely delays of GI Bill payments 33.3 % ($n=7$)	17. University military differences ($n=12$)	versus cultural 57.1%
10. Feelings of difference 66.6% ($n=14$)	15. Receiving only partial educational benefits during semester breaks 28.6% ($n=6$)	18. University bureaucratic systems and strictures ($n=12$)	57.1%
11. Initial need for academic support 47.6% ($n=10$)	16.		
12. Unique classroom considerations 52.3 % ($n=11$)			
13. Disability related issues 71.4 % ($n=15$)			

Impeding Individual Factors

Financial insecurities

Even though participants were utilizing or had exhausted their GI Bill educational benefits, many of them talked about their frustrating financial problems. Some participants said they wanted to clarify what they believed to be a widely held public misconception, that the GI Bill covered all their financial needs. Theo responded, "It's been incredibly hard to try to find money. I take loans out, beg, whatever I can do to get by in school. ... so that's a lot of emotional stress too, huge emotional toll." Tara stated, "You know because they pay you in arrears, I need to be able to pay my rent, I need to be able to pay my insurance, I need to pay my bills. ... finances is a big stressor. Yeah, it keeps me worried a lot." Robert shared how humiliated he felt when after exploring all other financial options, he had to apply for food stamps during the final semesters at the university.

Feelings of difference

Two-thirds of the 21 participants (n=14) reported experiencing feelings of difference. For the most part, comments were centered on their beliefs that student veterans experienced life differently than typical university students. Some participants postulated that this hindered social interactions because they have very few experiences in common with nonveteran students. For example, Dan remarked,

Certainly I think my, biggest um...(exhales) stress was not really having anybody to relate to on campus. ... having all those other kids around me that I didn't think were going through the same things I was going through... was probably the biggest source of stress.

Evan said, "I don't understand, maybe, the 19, 20-year-old mindset as much and I don't think they understand my perspective or background as well. ... It's like you'll always be different." In addition, three of the interviewees' remarks highlighted gender differences. For instance Kim remarked:

I came to campus already feeling different, having gotten used to being treated differently in the military because I am a woman, not just a woman, but a woman of color. Being on a campus that is predominantly White, with solid work experiences that the typical student who just left high school does not have, just exacerbates these feelings of difference. Um, I guess I just need to get used to the fact that I am different.

It should be noted however, that student veterans relayed varied degrees of feelings of difference, which for many did not impede their ability to perform well academically or get involved with campus events as they desired. There was not much variance in how student veterans who were further along in their studies expressed their feelings of difference, and newer students except that those upper class students had already developed ways to mitigate those feelings which included strategies such as, seeking guidance from upper class student veterans about study tips; brainstorming with other new students; utilizing study tips learned from the voluntary student veterans orientation course; talking with professors and advisors; utilizing tutoring services at the Center; or just figuring it out on their own.

Initial need for academic support

Close to 50% of the participants (n=10) also expressed frustration with the difficulty they encountered trying to "be a student," especially during the first year or two of their enrollment. Carl said despite the rigors in the military, and the leadership responsibilities he held there, he spoke about his difficulties with time management during his first few semesters on campus:

I didn't understand the academic mindset and how to get out of a workload mindset. I needed help to learn how to be a student again ...and that was what another student

veteran who was here a couple years before me taught me. He took me under his wing, so to speak.

James stated that he needed someone to say, "This is how you study, this is why you study, this is how you write. Um, you can't write like you're writing an operations manual. You have to write like writing a novel that someone's wanting to read."

Unique classroom considerations

Fifty-two percent of the participants (n=11) mentioned that because of their experiences during military deployment, they have a heightened awareness of safety and their surroundings. For example, Joe, talked about how,

unsettling it is for me every time an instructor uses a clicker with a red beam to point on a PowerPoint on the board. On the battlefield that could be a weapon that cost me my life or the lives of my partners.

Robert articulated a concern shared by a number of the participants:

One of the biggest hassle would probably be being in big classes. 'Cause I'm always looking around at people and I'm always trying to find the farthest away to where I can see the doors and stuff. . . I always want to see the doors. I always want to sit with my back to a wall so that I'm always, facing front. ...You know, whenever we train for stuff, it's always forefront, not behind you. ...if your back is against the wall, you're already prepared.

Alex said that students talking to each other in class really bothered him; the military does not tolerate that.

There were two girls that would sit together and they would always talk. ...I couldn't hear what they were saying. I could just always hear them talking, and that would get me angry and then I would get angrier and angrier and angrier. And I wanted to just yell at them.

Disability related issues

A little over 71% of the participants (n=15) talked about the difficulties they encountered as they tried to manage being a student living with a disability. For example, Justin stated,

I get the panic attacks in crowded areas. Some of these classrooms are very crowded, uh, very large classes and it's very hard to feel comfortable inside those. And the seating itself is not built for somebody my size or my disabilities.

Other participants spoke of their anxiety.

Several students shared their experience living with a physical disability. Elizabeth remarked, "Chronic pain, changes you as a person. Um, sometimes I'm just completely immobilized and cannot do anything for a while. Can you imagine what happens to my school work when that happens?" Robert also lived with pain and said, "Because of injuries I sustained in my back and knee while serving, by the end of the day I'm usually hurting pretty bad, but I don't complain, I just find somewhere to crash." Carl revealed too that he too was restricted by, "Mostly chronic pain. Limited mobility."

One student, Lucy, who experiences Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) said,

I sometimes shut myself away in the darkness. ...When the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder kicked in, my grades started going down the tubes. I couldn't remember things, I had anxiety when I was taking the tests. I would study my butt off, of course

with (University) you have to read and read and read and read. I read everything I was supposed to and it did not stay in my head.

Another student with PTSD, Karen, said, “I think that everybody who comes back [from deployment] has some, some element of PTSD. I mean we don’t all go seeking mental health support, but it doesn’t mean it’s not there.”

Impeding Noncampus Factors

Untimely delays of GI Bill payments

One-third of the participants aired their frustrations regarding the untimely payments of their GI Bill education benefits to the University and the distress this caused them. Majority of the participants said that they received their benefits sometime mid-late October having completed almost six weeks or more of school. These students shared that the GI Bill was their primary source of income after depleting whatever savings they had. Recognizing the inflexibility of the government’s policy regarding when payments are made to the school, these students called on the University to “cut us some slack” knowing that payments from the government was certain, but was generally late.

Receiving only Partial Educational Benefits during Semester Breaks

Approximately 29 % of the participants (n=6) also talked about not knowing beforehand that they would not receive any educational benefits during semester breaks, i.e. summer break and winter break unless they were taking classes. Further, they learned that to receive full benefits they had to be enrolled as a full-time student actively working toward earning a degree.

Impeding University/campus Factors

University versus military cultural differences

Fifty-seven percent of the participants (n=12) described how the culture in the military is different from that held among civilians. This was a common view held by these participants regardless of the number of years spent in the military. Primarily they likened the military to an institution of discipline, responsibility, and camaraderie. Sometimes this comparison creates a dissonance for veterans that can make them intolerant of civilian/campus culture. Many of the participants stated that the cultural differences make the transition to academic life less smooth than they would have liked. For instance, Alex remarked, “In the military, you’re used to clear instructions and you go from here to there and you’re told how to do everything.” Dan stated, “Mostly my frustration is just a discipline thing, you know, the discipline and the adherence to rules that you’ve gained in the military are generally not found, um, in the general population.”

University’s bureaucratic systems and strictures

Of the 21 interviewees 57.1% (n=16) expressed their frustration with the copious paper work that they had to navigate to access military educational benefits and search for scholarships and grants. Evan commented on the frustrations he experienced trying to access his GI Bill benefits.

It was like, all the responsibility was on my shoulders and it is a lot of stuff. I didn’t know, so I had to call the VA. ... I had to be the middleman between the university and the VA. ... if you’ve ever called the VA, it’s a pain in the butt. You’re on the phone for hours.

Elizabeth stated, “Resources that are available to you aren’t necessarily common knowledge. You really have to dig to see what is available to you. They are like hidden gems.

DISCUSSION

This study gives voice to undergraduate student veterans in higher education. The data revealed that despite the fact that student veterans may experience some challenges similar to other diverse groups of students (i.e., nontraditional, first-generation, and underrepresented minority students), student veterans have unique differences, even among themselves, that should be given special attention by campus officials (Jenner, 2017). Importantly, the information about student veterans' experiences should be used to inform practices in higher education, to better support this population in their pursuit of higher education, and to increase the likelihood of their academic success (Jones, 2013).

It is not surprising that at least half of the participants highlighted their military experience as an individual supportive factor. There is an expansive body of literature that showcases the strengths of veterans, namely their discipline, leadership skills and goal-oriented nature (Olsen et al., 2014; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). The remaining number of participants, who did not cite their military experience as a source of support, shared their frustrations about entering academia with knowledge and skills garnered in the military, yet struggled with how to apply these skills to academia, at least during the first few semesters.

The supportive noncampus factors that 71% of the interviewees reported were family members: primarily spouses/partners, and other connections with veterans/military folks beyond the campus community, including receiving federal financial support. These findings are somewhat aligned with Bean and Metzner's (1985) research indicating that nontraditional students greatest support comes from interactions with noncollege relationships (Weidman 1989), rather than their college peers as do traditional age students (Tinto, 2007). On the other hand, almost an equal number of participants talked about the support they receive from other student veterans on campus. It may be that peer support looks differently for student veterans whereby connections with other military folks are deemed important, whether they exist on or off the campus.

INTERPRETATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Supportive University/campus factors reported by student veterans were examined through the lens of Vacchi and Berger's (2014) student veteran support model (i.e., services, transition support, academic/faculty interactions, and peer and general campus support).

Services

Seventy-six percent of the interviewees (n=16) identified the following two university services as supportive offerings of the university: priority registration for student veterans, and proficient financial aid staff/bursars at the university dedicated to student veterans. These findings call for universities and colleges to provide priority registration to student veterans, and designate specially trained staff to support student veterans' transition to campus by helping them navigate paperwork and bureaucratic requirements.

Transition Support

The student veterans in this study did not specifically mention transition supports proposed by Vacchi and Berger (2014) as an area of University support.

Academic/faculty interactions

Academic interactions, the third area of support identified by Vacchi and Berger (2014) was identified as a supportive factor; specifically helpful academic advisors and faculty. Nearly 60% of participants underscored the timeliness and quality of academic advising in contrast to Vacchi's (2012) pilot study that suggested that academic advising had little to no effect on

students' perception of campus veteran friendliness. Given the emphasis placed in this study of having a meaningful relationship with academic advisers, colleges/universities should take a proactive approach to training academic advisors, especially those who serve as advisors to this unique population. Perhaps, each academic department could designate and train one student veteran academic adviser (DiRamio, Ackerman & Mitchell, 2008). Training should include knowledge about the GI Bill benefits; requirements to receive military education benefits (i.e. full-time enrollment and reduced payments during semester breaks); and university policies on credits for military work and transfer credits; and campus resources available to student veterans.

Peer support

Consistent with Vacchi and Berger's (2014) model, veteran peer interactions (n=15) and the Veterans Center (n=16) were also mentioned by participants as university/campus supportive factors. Despite contradictory data about the relevance of student veteran organizations to their success (Student Veterans of America, 2011), veterans in this study and others (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Livingston et al., 2011) emphasize peer interactions with other student veterans and the Veterans Center. While fostering engagement and reducing communication gaps with nonmilitary students should not be ignored, this and other research support the paramount importance of veterans' reliance on other veterans for both academic and social support (Schiavone & Gentry, 2014; Tomar & Stoffel, 2012).

Based on these findings, it would behoove colleges and universities to cultivate campuses that are culturally-sensitive to veterans' needs, and provide multimodal opportunities for student veterans to connect and network if they so desire (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009; Vacchi & Berger, 2014). One strategy for building a university that is sensitive to the needs of veterans is to establish veteran specific services.

Impeding factors reported by participants in this study were grouped into three categories: individual, noncampus, and University/campus. The five individual factors are: (a) financial insecurities; (b) feelings of difference; (c) initial need for academic support; (d) unique classroom considerations; and (e) disability related issues. The two impeding noncampus factors are: (a) untimely delays of GI Bill payments; and (b) receiving partial educational benefits during semester breaks. The two impeding University/campus factors are: (a) university versus military cultural differences; and (b) university's bureaucratic systems and strictures. The impeding factors identified in this study can inform college and university programs that are designed to better meet the needs of student veterans. First, increasing awareness of the availability and access to financial supports for student veterans beyond the GI Bill is essential (Tomar & Stoffel, 2012). Student orientations that meet the unique needs and concerns of student veterans should also be considered. The participants recommended that a specialized orientation should be designed and made a requirement for all student veterans. This orientation would also be an excellent way to showcase all the resources available for student veterans. The participants' recommendations dovetail well with DiRamio and Jarvis' (2011) who suggest that veteran-specific orientation should also include reflective writings about their military experiences and how they make meaning of those experiences. This educational strategy can encourage student veterans to analyze the difference between the two settings and facilitate an understanding of the concept of self-authorship compared to reliance on the external authority that they were familiar with in the military (DiRamio, & Jarvis, 2011).

Second, colleges and universities may be able to mitigate student veterans' feelings of difference, and cultural transitioning difficulties by establishing opportunities for connecting with other student veterans. Certainly, efforts to connect with other campus organizations

should also be encouraged to engender the appreciation of differences and diversity, and inclusive nature of the campus. One structure recommended by several participants was to launch a formal peer mentorship program that involves assigning a veteran who has completed at least one semester at the university with a newly registered student veteran. Several participants noted that the help they received from seasoned student veterans supported their decision to mentor new student veterans. Some scholars suggest encouraging informal peer mentorship types of relationships to mitigate any possible burden that formal mentorship mechanisms may cause (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). Despite the fact that participants in this study did not identify transitions as an impediment to college success, DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008) propose the availability of a transition coach that addresses “administrative hurdles, offer academic advice, and provide support for the emotional aspects of a transition to civilian [academic] life” (p. 94). Several participants in this study recommended that universities provide opportunities to build support through face-to-face support groups; a strong web presence; and other virtual interactions.

Third, to provide academic support for student veterans, colleges and universities should consider making tutoring available from tutors who have been formally oriented to the academic challenges faced by some student veterans so that academic support strategies can be tailored specifically for this population. The participants also stressed their appreciation of meeting with tutors at the Veterans Center rather than them going to the general tutoring center.

Fourth, our data analysis suggests that student veterans have unique classroom needs that are the result of their combat experience. These include anxiety in large classrooms, hyper vigilance and other symptoms of PTSD, and poor class attendance due to chronic pain and disabilities. These considerations highlight the need for educating faculty and staff about military experiences and culture, the impact of chronic pain, the nature of psychiatric disabilities such as PTSD, and the importance of establishing partnerships with resources such as the disability services office and counseling centers on campus. For example, advisors might suggest that when possible, student veterans enroll in courses that have small enrollments for the transitioning semesters. Further, these findings may suggest the need for faculty to be mindful of military experiences and be willing to offer informal needs-based accommodations such as flexible class attendance. Flexible attendance accommodations would prevent the student from being penalized for periodically missing a class, or an assignment deadline to mitigate the effects of chronic pain, and/or unpredictable nature of other forms of nonapparent disabilities and health conditions.

Despite the resounding praise for the level of professionalism, and good quality of service most of the participants reportedly received from the bursars, fixed external governmental policies were barriers. Because of these barriers, several participants in this study received their GI Bill payments later in the semester causing them to face undue financial hardship. However, as Vacchi (2012) pointed out, federal money allocated to student veterans is certain, therefore colleges/universities should consider putting flexible measures in place to reduce the hardships faced by this population, such as deferring the payment of tuition and other fees to later on in the semester to allow time for processing GI Bill payments.

University/campus impediments reported by participants were (a) university versus military cultural differences; and (b) university’s bureaucratic systems and strictures. Given the frustration expressed by student veterans with regard to the navigation of the university’s cumbersome bureaucratic structures, there is a need for universities to make administrative programs and policies more transparent and user-friendly.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors that positively contribute to the academic success of student veterans and highlight the factors that impede efforts to improve their academic outcomes, experience, and graduation rates. A wide range of professions can participate in efforts to support success and remove impediments while student veterans are attending college. For example, departments of education and social work on campuses are in ideal positions to take a leadership role in working with campus administrators to use the findings from student veterans' research studies to reform and augment services offered to military/veteran students.

There was an underdeveloped emergent theme in this study among female veteran students about feelings of difference. This was especially true for female student veterans of color. Future research should examine the academic experiences of student veterans with regard to gender, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and immigrant status, and the intersectionality of these identities. Academia has an ethical responsibility to ensure that the quality of the educational experience for student veterans is relevant and supportive.

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