

IN AND OUT: VETERANS IN TRANSITION AND HIGHER EDUCATION

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The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) spends nearly \$12 billion annually on education benefits (VA, 2016). Veterans are showing up on campus in ever increasing numbers. While recruiting veterans makes sense from an enrollment management perspective, as most veterans come to campus with financial aid, how well prepared is higher education to receive them? Given the investment the government, taxpayers, and individual veterans are making, colleges and universities would be well served to understand these students. This article explores how veterans have changed the landscape of higher education, delves into the culture of the military and its impact on veterans, examines the challenges many veterans face as they transition out of the military, and concludes with a discussion of ways in which higher education institutions might thoughtfully and intentionally assist veterans' transition into life as successful college students.

Introduction

I am a veteran. For over 28 years I served in the U.S. Navy. As a pioneer in the integration of women at the U.S. Naval Academy, I began my career in Annapolis, went on to become a naval aviator, served in command, and ultimately retired as a Navy Captain. Currently in the process of transitioning my leadership skills into higher education, I am not alone. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) spends over \$12 billion annually on education benefits through the Post-9/11 GI Bills supporting over 790,000 service members, veterans, and other beneficiaries (VA, 2016). In addition, more than 325,000 active-duty service members enrolled in postsecondary courses in 2011, using more than \$1 billion in funding through

the Department of Defense (DOD) Voluntary Education Program (NASPA, 2013), another pathway to secondary education. Although exact numbers are not known, veterans are showing up on campus in ever increasing numbers (NASPA, 2013). Post-9/11 GI Bill usage has increased from an average of 622,000 individuals in fiscal years 2010 to 2014 to over 790,000 individuals in 2016 (VA, 2016; Veterans Economic Communities Initiative [VECI], 2016). This influx of new students with unique needs demands the attention of higher education. Recruiting veterans makes sense from an enrollment management perspective, as most veterans come to campus with financial aid, but how well prepared is higher education to receive and retain them? Colleges and universities pride themselves on

being veteran friendly (Altman, 2015), but helping faculty and staff understand the prior experiences of veterans and how these experiences might impact their college student experience are of critical importance. Given the investment that the government, taxpayers, and individual veterans are making to meet their personal and professional education goals, colleges and universities would be well served to understand these students. The following is an exploration of how veterans have changed the landscape of higher education, a discussion of the culture of the military and its impact on veterans, an examination of the challenges many veterans face as they transition out of the military, and a short discussion of ways in which higher education institutions might thoughtfully and intentionally help veterans transition into life as a successful college student.

Short History of the GI Bill

Veterans on campus is not a new phenomenon. After World War II, the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944 (also known as the GI Bill) provided a wide range of educational benefits for returning veterans and helped them reintegrate into society. As a result of the GI Bill, a reported 7.8 million veterans received education benefits (Bennett, 1996) and began flooding the campuses of colleges and universities, forever changing the landscape of higher education (Loss, 2012). No longer were students solely the traditional 18- to 22-year-olds from the educated elite; they were also life-experienced veterans who sought transition to a civilian life.

Considered one of the "Big Three" federal higher education policies of the past century, the GI Bill became part of a global education strategy (Loss, 2012, p. 258). The other two policies, the National Defense Education Act (1958) and the Higher Education Act (1965), further signaled significant federal involvement in educating citizens for our democracy (Loss, 2012). According to Loss (2012), the GI Bill "consecrated the relationship between higher education and psychological adjustment" (p. 365). The GI Bill also "made access to higher education a national priority" (Spellings, 2006, p. ix). Approximately half of the 16 million returning World War II veterans used

the GI Bill for education or training, and more specifically, an estimated 2.2 million veterans used the GI Bill at the college or university level (Loss, 2012). This massive influx of veterans led to record expansion of higher education (Immerwahr, Johnson, & Gasbarra, 2008; Loss, 2012). Veterans significantly impacted the landscape of higher education.

The GI Bill has changed over the years, and veterans have too. During the post-Vietnam War era, as the government moved to an entirely volunteer force, veterans' education benefits became voluntary and required military members to opt into the programs and contribute financially, a significant departure from previous policy. The Veterans Education Assistance Program (VEAP—chapter 32 of Title 38, U.S. Code) and the subsequent Montgomery GI Bill required service members to make elective contributions from their military pay in order to participate in the education assistance program (VA, 2017). Both programs met with mixed success in terms of recruiting and usage (Asch, Fair, & Kilburn, 2000).

In 2008, the GI Bill changed once again, giving veterans and eligible family members one of the most generous education assistance packages since the benefits began. The Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008, known as the Post-9/11 GI Bill, signaled a second large influx of veterans into higher education (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). As the Post-9/11 Bill went into effect, the American Council on Education warned that higher education needed to prepare for as many as 2 million veterans per year (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011).

The innovatively progressive Post-9/11 GI Bill provides up to 100% tuition and fee coverage, a monthly housing allowance, up to \$1,000 a year for books and supplies, a one-time relocation allowance, the option to transfer benefits to family members, and participation in the Yellow Ribbon GI Enhancement Program. The Yellow Ribbon program allows veterans to attend private schools and graduate programs costing more than the state tuition cap without any additional expense to the veteran (VA, 2017). Since the Post-9/11 GI Bill's introduction and due to the generous benefits offered, veterans are taking greater advantage of the opportunity to use higher education as a means to transition to civilian lives (H. Robinson, Department

of Veterans Affairs and Navy veteran, personal communication, February 12, 2017; K. Hull, Vanderbilt University and Army veteran, personal communication, February 15, 2017; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011).

Over 5 million post-9/11 veterans will transition as civilians by 2020 (American Council on Education [ACE], 2015), and the factors affecting veterans' persistence and the institutional practices likely to enhance their success are not widely known (NASPA, 2013). Veterans on campus are nontraditional students. They are older, life experienced, and more likely to be married and have families (VA, 2017). What makes them different is "they possess unique characteristics stemming from personal experiences that few college administrators, faculty members, campus staff, or traditionally aged students can claim for themselves" (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011, p. 1). Many of those who work in higher education have little to no military experience, which leads to difficulty in understanding veteran students and the culture from which they are transitioning (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011).

Total Culture—the Ins and Outs of the Military Experience

As an organization, the military is a closed system—a closed culture—with a focus on organizational order and control (Kast & Rosenzweig, 1972). Entry into and exit from the system is highly controlled. It may also be considered what sociologist Ervin Goffman (1961) considers a "total institution." In a total institution, the normal barriers between work, home and social life are intermixed (Goffman, 1961). "The basic social arrangement in modern society is that we tend to sleep, play and work in different places" (Goffman, 1961, p. 314). In the military culture, work, sleep, and play occur in the same place. Service in the military is all encompassing—it is sold as a way of life. The basics of food, clothing, and shelter are provided, along with medical and dental care and social and recreation for service members. The environment is highly controlled as new members are initiated into the culture.

Specific language reinforces this unique culture. A person goes "in" and comes "out" several or many years later. "When did you go in?" and "when did you get out?" are ubiquitous questions asked of nearly every

service member. Beginning in boot camp (for enlisted service members) or through commissioning programs (for officers), the military provides a limited way into the new culture. Once members come "in" to the culture, their hair is cut, their civilian clothing is taken away, their identity as an individual is stripped away, and a new mission-driven team member is created. New members raise their right hands and pledge an oath to "support and defend the constitution of the United States against all enemies foreign and domestic" (5 U.S. Code 3331) as they become restricted in their first amendment rights. They cannot speak out against the military. They become subject to a new set of norms, rules, regulations, and standards of conduct regulated by the military legal system, the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ). Under the UCMJ service members can be tried not only for crimes punishable under civilian law, but also for conduct that affects the "good order and discipline" of the military (UCMJ, n.d.). Unique military crimes such as desertion, absence without leave, disrespect toward superiors, failure to obey orders, dereliction of duty, drunk on duty, malingering, and conduct unbecoming an officer are all prosecutable offenses within the military culture (UCMJ). In addition to the UCMJ, military members are bound by a Code of Conduct. They pledge an oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States, and are prepared to give their lives in its defense (EO 10631, Article 1, 1955).

Military members live within this closed culture for a select number of years. Enlistments range from two to six years, and if recommended for reenlistment, they may reenlist for a predetermined period of time. For officers, they accept a commission and may remain until their obligated service period has ended. After the end of obligated service, officers may resign their commission and return to civilian life. While "in," members prepare, train, deploy, return from deployment to their units and their families, and the process starts again (H. Robinson, Department of Veterans Affairs and Navy veteran, personal communication, February 12, 2017).

THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY

Veterans live a life of commitment to the mission of their service and to their country. They are highly

attuned to the mission of the organizations in which they reside and to the focus of the nation they serve. While on active duty they receive ongoing training and education, and many attend college part time or receive college credit for their military training. Once “out,” the best qualified are highly sought after by employers for their discipline and skills (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). But what else goes on for veterans in the time between going “in” and coming “out” of the military experience?

Many veterans who served during the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts experienced repeated deployments, combat conditions, and significant time away from their families. Several suffer from a myriad of issues including posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, traumatic brain injury (TBI), and military sexual trauma (MST) (Clark, 2014; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Based on personal knowledge acquired through my 28-year naval career and beyond, it is not uncommon for veterans to suffer in silence. While “in” the military, I observed that members are often reluctant to seek help. In the closed culture of the military, seeking help is often associated with weakness. While counseling services are available to service members, there is stigma associated with seeking help, and there is potential impact to the member’s career. For example, an aviator may be reluctant to seek help from the flight surgeon because in doing so, he or she may be removed from flying status. An intelligence specialist may lose a security clearance and access to the work that he or she performs if psychological counseling is sought. Often, help is not accessed until the member gets “out” and leaves the service, then gets help through the Veterans Health Administration or other service providers (H. Robinson, Department of Veterans Affairs and Navy veteran, personal communication, February 12, 2017).

THE VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION

The Veterans Health Administration is the primary health data collection source and health care provider for veterans once they leave military service. In 2002, the VA implemented a universal military sexual trauma screening program and began providing free care to veterans who experienced sexual trauma (Kimerling et al., 2010). The VA defines military sexual trauma as:

psychological trauma, which in the judgment of a VA mental health professional, resulted from a physical assault of a sexual nature, battery of a sexual nature, or sexual harassment which occurred while the Veteran was serving on active duty, active duty for training, or inactive duty training (Federal Law, Title 38, U.S. Code 1720D).

MST includes any sexual activity where the member was involved against his or her will. The VA (2017) reports that 1 in 4 women veterans screened nationally report experiencing MST while 1 in 100 male veterans report experiencing MST. In addition, among veterans who use VA health care (VA, 2017):

- Twenty-three out of 100 women reported sexual assault when in the military.
- Fifty-five out of 100 women and 38 out of 100 men have experienced sexual harassment when in the military.

Recognizing that not all veterans receive care through the VA and that too many women throughout my career have expressed to me their reluctance to report trauma or seek help, the numbers may actually be higher.

In addition to MST, veterans also experience PTSD. The VA (2017) reports that while 6 out of 10 men and 5 out of 10 women will experience some sort of trauma in their lives, military members are more likely to experience PTSD in any given year. PTSD is defined as “a mental health problem that some people develop after experiencing or witnessing a life-threatening event, like combat, a natural disaster, a car accident, or sexual assault” (VA, 2017). Symptoms range from reliving the event, avoiding situations that remind the person of the event, having more negative beliefs and feelings, and feeling keyed up (also called hyperarousal) (VA, 2017). The VA (2017) reports that 11% to 20% of veterans who served in Operations Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Enduring Freedom (OEF) experience PTSD in any given year.

Women in the military are at “high risk” for exposure to traumatic events and to experiencing sexual trauma (VA, 2017). About 15% of all military personnel in Iraq were women, and while men were more likely to experience combat, a growing number of women experienced combat as well (VA, 2017). The

VA (2017) reports that women in the military are at higher risk for exposure to sexual harassment or sexual assault than men and that “future studies are needed to better understand the effects of women’s exposure to both combat and sexual assault” (VA, 2017). Women may be more likely to seek help after trauma because they are more likely to share their feelings, but it is unknown how many seek treatment while still in uniform. Many women do not seek help until they retire or leave the service. One former Air Force enlisted woman who sought my counsel and had multiple experiences of sexual trauma while in the service said, “I could only get the help I needed once I got out.” Several women I know who have experienced trauma, including sexual trauma, are now receiving the help they need through the VA. Many women wait and they suffer in silence.

The VA (2017) reports that TBI, caused by exposure to explosions, is also common among veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. TBI is an injury to the head that disrupts the functioning of the brain. Common sources of “blast injury most often are improvised explosive devices (IEDs)” (VA, 2017). Injuries can range from mild concussion to disorientation, confusion, slipping into a coma, and loss of memory before or after the event (VA, 2017). Later symptoms may include persistent headache or neck pain; sensitivity to light or noise, blurred vision; loss of balance; tiredness and lack of energy; ringing in the ears; chronic depression, anxiety, and apathy; slowness in thinking, speaking, and reading; and problems with concentration and organizing daily tasks (VA, 2017). All veterans who served in combat after 9/11 are screened for TBI upon separation from active duty.

What is important to understand is that *many veterans have sustained multiple experiences of trauma*. This not to imply that all veterans have experienced trauma but to suggest that multiple factors may need to be addressed by institutions as they commit to veteran student welfare. Help is available through the VA’s polytrauma centers that provide interdisciplinary evaluation and treatment for veterans with multiple traumas. What is important to remember is that veterans may or may not access care as they transition “out” of the service.

TRANSITION TO CIVILIAN LIFE

“The transition from military service can be one of the most challenging encountered by any individual” (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011, p. 7). Veterans have lived a life of commitment within a closed community, which has provided significant support. As veterans transition, they move out of this community and must reconnect to a civilian community, one that may have become quite foreign to them. Veterans need support. They need to find a new community to serve, one that is committed to their welfare. Many have come into higher education with combat experience and combat-associated trauma. They are in the midst of a critical life transition. They may not seek help, but educators may suggest they do.

To assist in understanding transition for veterans, DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) point to multiple theories of transition in *Home Alone? Applying Theories of Transition to Support Student Veterans’ Success*. Transition calls for “adjustments in a variety of areas, including personal, social, academic, and vocational” (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011, p. 7). Many veterans have a sense of feeling lost when returning to civilian life, but colleges and universities can help them find their way. DiRamio and Jarvis, 2011 point to research by Bridges, 2004, as cited by DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011, p. 9 which suggests that every transition “starts with an ending rather than a new beginning” (p. 8). Bridges identifies the transition process “out” of the military using the alliteration of 4Ds of “disengagement,” “disidentification,” “disenchantment,” and “disorientation” (p. 9). Each of these phases are part of the process a veteran might experience as he or she transitions out of the military. DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) also reference other theories that might help in understanding the process for transitioning veterans.

Veterans might also experience a crisis of identity during transition. New roles and new identities must be developed as veterans become civilians and students (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). “For the student veteran, a number of relationships have been predetermined in a strict hierarchical environment, and the transition to a less programmed civilian world can present a challenge” (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011, p. 56). “In addition to the social identities of race, culture, sexual orientation, and gender, other preentry variables such as first-generation status, officer or enlisted rank, socioeconomic status,

and disability all differentially affect the veteran” (p. 57). DiRamio and Jarvis suggest multiple models as frameworks for consideration to assist veterans in recognizing that a crisis of identity is part of the transition process.

The Moving In, Moving Through, Moving Out model (Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989), as referenced by DiRamio and Jarvis (2011), has applicability to veterans to understand the dynamics of transition and the factors that individuals must cope with to succeed.

DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) also suggest that additional models based on identity development (Marcia, 1966) and multiple dimensions of identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000) may be helpful. They also “suggest that a veteran’s transition from military duty to civilian college student is really not complete until interaction with diverse others takes place” (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011, p. 4). Transition is difficult and applying frameworks of understanding to a veteran’s process of transition may be helpful in understanding these students.

Conclusion

“The worldview and humanity veterans bring to the campus are vastly different from those of young Millennials” (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011, p. 24). We must remember and respect this fact. As our newest veterans transition, higher education needs to be prepared to receive them. Veterans changed the landscape of higher education nearly 60 years ago, and they are continuing to change it today. Today’s veterans come with discipline coupled with a mission orientation, and many have experienced trauma—sometimes multiple traumas. Women veterans are at “high risk” for multiple trauma, including sexual trauma. As veterans leave military service, they may be in the most difficult transition of their lives. There are many ways in which higher education institutions might thoughtfully and intentionally reach out to veterans so that they know they are not alone. As suggested by DiRamio and Jarvis (2011), higher education institutions might provide increased support services for veterans to navigate financial aid and to receive academic and advising services, as well as psychological and counseling services, perhaps in a dedicated physical space where veterans may also find a new place for community. More

research is needed, but understanding the qualities, experiences, and challenges veterans bring to campus is a great place to start.

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