From Combat to Campus:
Voices of Student-Veterans

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What needs do veterans bring to campus? Little is known about this emerging student population. The researchers interviewed 25 students who served in the current Iraq and Afghan conflicts. This was a multicampus study, with the sample derived from three geographically diverse universities representing northern, southern, and western regions of the United States. Using a model of adult transition by Schlossberg as a guiding theory, a grounded theory epistemology was used to generate a conceptual framework for understanding students who are making the transition from wartime service to college. Findings and implications will help institutions organize a holistic approach for assisting veterans and improving their chances for success.

Little is known about the expectations and experiences that combat veterans bring with them to the campus. While wars are traumatic and disruptive for a nation, they are often life-changing for those who participate in them (Lifton, 1992). What are the needs of individuals who

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leave combat and come to postsecondary institutions—soldiers who become students? The purpose of this study was to learn from the veterans themselves about their military and civilian journeys, particularly the transition from active duty to college student. The information presented here is useful for both bringing this group into the campus community and increasing the chances for student success, because it will help colleges plan to serve the needs of an emerging population.

The concept of community is central to the work of student affairs administrators (Boyer, 1990), in part because student success is enhanced when campuses provide environments that are both inclusive (Blimling & Whitt, 1999) and supportive (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2006). An important means of building inclusive communities on campuses is to provide services that support the needs of unique groups of students. Student affairs programs provide services that assist special student populations. Some of these programs are in response to federal mandates, such as programs for students with disabilities. Others reflect the unique focus of the institution, such as services to fraternity and sorority members, learning communities, first-year students, international students, honors programs, student athletes, and nontraditional students. In each specialized program or situation, the goal is to promote student success by recognizing the importance of individualized support, based on the unique needs of a subset of the student body.

Following the Second World War, the GI Bill, with its provisions for educational benefits, brought veterans to the campuses in large numbers, changing higher education forever (Cohen, 1998). With approximately one-third of the veterans who were eligible for benefits entering colleges, much attention was paid to accommodating increased enrollments. It was not until veterans from a later conflict, Vietnam, came to campus, that there was any recognition that combat veterans represent a unique population. The focus of campus officials was devoted to dealing with unrest caused by involvement in an unpopular war rather than providing services for a special population (Heineman, 1993). The war in Afghanistan began in 2001, the war in Iraq in 2003, and, while these numbers have changed over time, troop strength for these missions ranged between 170,000 and 251,000; as of March, 2007, just over 1,500,000 members of the armed services were deployed to combat zones (Defense Manpower Data Center,

2007). As combat veterans enroll in colleges following their service in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, they are likely to require support services. The purpose of this study was to discover both the challenges veterans face when attending college and the types of support services that schools can offer to ensure student success.

The amount of scholarly literature studying student-veterans is slim and dated. Joanning (1975) looked at the academic performance of a sample of Vietnam era veterans at the University of Iowa and found that veterans earned a higher GPA than did nonveterans, although the veterans sample did not differentiate military service from combat. Others (Card, 1983) found that Vietnam veterans did not attain 4-year college and graduate degrees at the same level as did their nonveteran peers. Using an ethnographic methodology, Horan (1990) reported on the experiences of Vietnam veterans at Florida State University in 1989 and found that while some faced problems with alcohol and drugs, they were, but for their shared combat experience, a fairly typical group of mature students, worried most about financing their educations and providing child care.

There is a need to update the literature for the current cohort of student-veterans, those having served in the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Moreover, previous research focused mostly on academic achievements and mental health, with less attention given to the notion of transition. Therefore, the literature on adult transition provides a good starting point for conceptualizing this study.

Theoretical Framework

Being called to active duty for an assignment that involves service in a combat zone represents a major transition; leaving that situation to return home and entering college are both transitions as well. Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995) defined transition as "any event, or nonevent, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (p. 27). In fact, the body of work by Schlossberg and her collaborators over the past 2 decades provided a "framework that would facilitate an understanding of adults in transition" (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 108). Classified as a psychosocial theory of adult development, this theory focused on the

significant transitional issues individuals face, while recognizing that not all of life's challenges are of equal importance.

For example, in their 1995 work, Schlossberg and her colleagues identified three types of transitions: those that are anticipated, those that are not anticipated, and nonevents. Since most military personnel know in advance when they will receive orders to active duty or a change in assignments that will take them into a war zone, the resulting transition would be classified as anticipated. Once engaged in the conflict, military personnel experience unscheduled and unanticipated transitions as they are reassigned or selected for additional duty. The nature of serving in combat is such that while danger may be anticipated, how danger will be experienced may not always be anticipated. Nonevents are those that are anticipated but that do not occur. Military personnel are trained to cope with specific combat situations, but those situations may not happen; orders to be shipped out or to be returned home are often cancelled. Sargent and Schlossberg (1988) contended that "people in transition are often preoccupied and a little confused" (p. 59), a reaction that is understandable when the transition results in experiences that are likely to be life altering.

Other work by Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989) provided a useful framework for thinking about transition. The "Moving In, Moving Through, Moving Out" model identifies factors that influence how individuals cope with transitions. When moving across the three phases, individuals evaluate each transition over time, determine the likely negative or positive effects, and conduct an inventory of resources available for managing change. Included in this type of self-analysis is a consideration of strengths and weaknesses based on personal and psychological factors, the social supports available, and coping strategies the individual could use to modify the situation, control the meaning of the transition, and manage the stress it causes (Schlossberg et al., 1989).

An analysis of Schlossberg's research revealed a consistent theme that transition is a process involving step-by-step change, working through events across a timeframe, and requiring adjustment across several of life's dimensions. This suggests that transition can be managed and, that if transition can be understood, the person who is experiencing it

can be aided as he or she moves through the process. Schlossberg (2004) noted:

> Transitions alter our lives—our roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions. . . . It is not the transition *per se* that is critical, but how much it changes one's roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions. The bigger the change, the greater the potential impact and the longer it may take to incorporate the transition and move on (pp. 3–4).

Being called to active duty and facing the prospect of combat qualifies as a major transition because it disrupts existing relationships and routines, replacing them with uncertainty, new relationships and routines, and a context that is life threatening. Evans et al. (1998) offered the opinion that research by Schlossberg and her colleagues provides a developmental theory that is "comprehensive in scope . . . and conceptually sound" (p. 122). It provided the framework for this study.

Method

The grounded theory approach of Glaser and Strauss (1967) was used to inductively develop key themes based on individual cases; the focus was on capturing the essence of experiences as they are perceived and described by the student-veterans themselves. Grounded theory, as a research epistemology, is particularly well suited for this study because it emphasizes how people's subjective thoughts and feelings are used to make meaning of the world (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Participants

Participants in this study were six women and 19 men enrolled at one of three research universities. The three institutions are geographically diverse, representing the northern, southern, and western regions of the United States. All 25 participants were recently on active duty, having served in the Iraq or Afghan conflicts between 2003 and 2007, and were full-time students at the time of this study. Eleven of the students were members of the reserves or National Guard; and the others were regular Army ($n = 4$), Marines ($n = 5$), and Air Force personnel ($n = 3$). Students still on active duty and thus receiving full military pay and benefits were excluded from the study. Ages ranged from

20 to 34, with the majority in their early twenties and a part of the millennial generation of students, the cohort born after 1982 (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Nine participants attended college before being deployed.

Sampling

In order to obtain the richest data possible, a purposeful sampling strategy was employed to identify participants, using a combination of both nonproportional quota and snowball sampling techniques (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Nonproportional quota sampling, in which a minimum number of a subgroup of the population is sought (Henry, 1990), was used to ensure that a sufficient number of women participated in the study, particularly because of the enlarged and active roles women have assumed in these conflicts. Snowball sampling, where participants referred others to take part in the study (Patton, 2001), was also used to recruit student-veterans.

Students were invited to participate by responding to posted flyers and with the assistance of personnel from student affairs offices such as financial aid and veterans services offices. The flyer invited students to participate in "a research study being conducted to learn from the experiences of students who are making the transition from active duty to college." Informed consent was obtained from each participant. All sampling decisions were made with the goal in mind of obtaining highly informative cases that would contribute to an understanding of student-veterans and the issues they faced. The decision to end the sampling at 25 cases was guided by researcher agreement that sufficient data had been collected and that clear themes and patterns had emerged (Creswell, 1997).

Interviews

In order to elicit authentic accounts about the subjective experiences of veterans returning to campus, interviews were conducted using a semistructured protocol known as "active interviewing" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). In terms of structure and formality, active interviewing falls between rigid-traditional scripting and the free form, such as story-telling or narrative interviewing. The key to active interviewing is to gain rapport with respondents and avoid manipulating them or their answers. Survey questions, such as "Please describe your service"

and "Please describe your current college experience," were designed to be open-ended, thus allowing participants the freedom to tell their stories with minimal interference. In accordance with a grounded theory approach, the questions were not designed to fit a particular theory or conceptual framework. The entire interview script is provided in Appendix A.

Survey questions were reviewed for face validity at the three universities by both veteran affairs personnel and the institutions' research review boards. Feedback about the questions and their design were incorporated into the final interview script. For example, at one university, a referral list of local agencies to assist veterans was added as a resource for participants in the study.

Members of the research team conducted the interviews with a particular focus on establishing trust with the participants. Trust is vital in the interview process in order to establish validity for a qualitative study (Huberman & Miles, 2005). Once a reasonable level of trust was established, each student-veteran was encouraged to tell his or her unique story. The interview technique known as "member checking" (Yin, 1994) was used when the interviewer restated something said by the participant in order to ensure accuracy. Interviews averaged 40 minutes each. More than 14 hours of audio recordings were transcribed, with the words of the participants representing the data used for the study. Each researcher independently reviewed and audited the transcripts of the entire group of 25 interviews, in order to check for completeness and resolve any inconsistencies in the data.
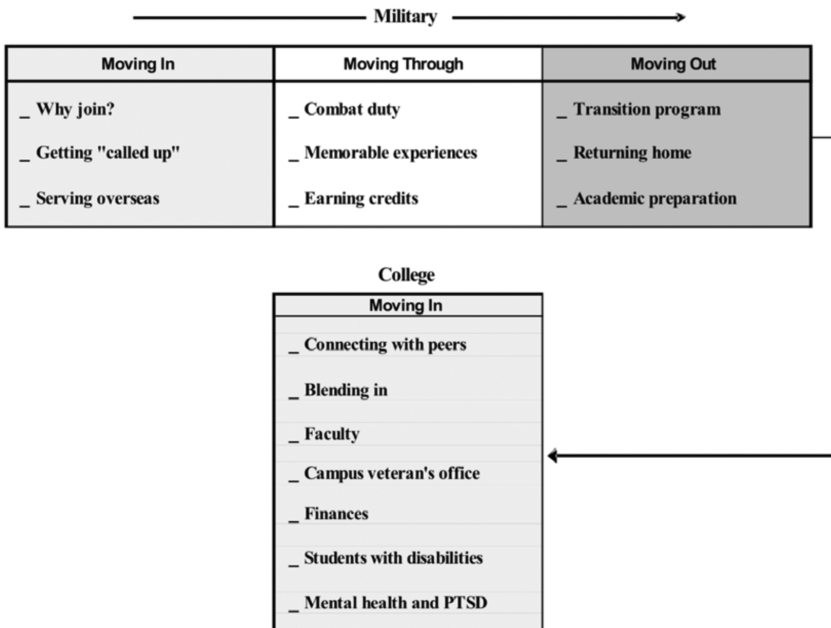
Analysis

Content analysis of the interview transcripts was performed by each researcher independently using the pattern coding method described by Miles and Huberman (1994). Pattern coding is a technique used to group "segments of data into smaller numbers of themes or constructs" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 69). Specific experiences, events, and relationships mentioned by the participants were each coded into corresponding categories and categories synthesized into themes. The research team worked together to reconcile their independent efforts into a final list of themes. The consensus themes thus provided the basis for the conceptual framework, a construct used to

conceptualize, describe, and explain the experiences of the student-veterans (Silverman, 2001).

Findings

The themes that emerged from the qualitative analysis fit neatly into the "Moving In, Moving Through, Moving Out" model for adult transition presented by Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989) and are shown in Figure 1. This particular approach is useful for studying student-veterans because it focuses on how individuals experience a change in assumptions about self and a corresponding change in both behavior and relationships (Schlossberg et al., 1995). The framework includes 16 themes organized within the "Moving In, Moving Through, Moving Out" headings (Schlossberg et al., 1989). This arrangement provides a structure to describe the complexities of this population and how campus professionals might piece together a holistic view of student-veterans.

Figure 1
Themes of Transition for Student-Veterans

Military →

Moving In	Moving Through	Moving Out
_ Why join?	_ Combat duty	_ Transition program
_ Getting "called up"	_ Memorable experiences	_ Returning home
_ Serving overseas	_ Earning credits	_ Academic preparation

College

Moving In
_ Connecting with peers
_ Blending in
_ Faculty
_ Campus veteran's office
_ Finances
_ Students with disabilities
_ Mental health and PTSD

Direct quotes support the findings in this study and each participant's interview identification number is noted within brackets. The richness of this study is in the student comments—the voices of the student-veterans themselves (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002).

Moving In (Military)

It is important to understand how military service shapes the disposition of veterans who are students. According to Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson (1997), when an individual is transitioning through the "moving in" process, she or he will need to "learn the ropes" and become familiar with rules, regulations, norms, and expectations of the new system (p. 167). The dramatic events of wartime service are by their very nature both life changing and personality altering to some degree (Lifton, 1992). This change manifests itself in a level of maturity not often present in the typical civilian college student. Data from this study can give campus professionals a deeper understanding of student-veteran issues of health, relationships, and academic preparedness. For example, a theme that came out of the interviews, "Why join?," gives insight into the motivations of this group of students.

One motivating factor that emerged was that this cohort experienced the 9-11 terrorist attacks as adolescents and the effect was profound. In fact, fifteen of the 25 participants cited the attacks as a reason for joining. This sense of patriotism is consistent with Strauss and Howe's (1991) description of the millennial "peer personality," including a propensity to emulate the elder generation, that of their grandparents. Their stories are captivatingly similar to Brokaw's (1998) "greatest generation," who fought the global threat of fascism in the Second World War. A Marine reservist described it this way, "One morning when I woke up to go to school in my senior year of high school, I saw the 9-11 footage. Saw the airplanes go through and that was when I decided, well, I'm gonna [sic] go enlist" [19].

Other reasons student-veterans cited for enlisting included a family tradition of military service, economic reasons, and to qualify for educational benefits. One female participant, a single mother, noted, "That was my motivation (to enlist): education, I suppose, and a better life for my daughter" [15]. The majority of women in this study

joined the military for primarily economic reasons. After enlistment and training, each participant was eventually called to serve in the Iraq or Afghan conflicts.

One of the most frustrating and disruptive aspects of military service reported by the students was being suddenly called to a new duty assignment, likely in an untimely and problematic way. This experience of the participants was coded as the theme "getting called up." For example:

> I had to withdraw from all my classes and that was so awful. I had just started classes. [The representative from the military said], "You probably won't get deployed, so go ahead and start classes. Don't worry about it." So I went ahead and started classes and still got deployed. [09]

Shorter troop rotations and the unsure status of many students who still owed an obligation to the military added to the frustration for several respondents. One student characterized the situation as depressing: "It was the second time the Marine Corps had taken me out of school, and I had to restart basically all over again. It is really hard, and actually depressing at some point, because you go from having a 3.0 at one university, to having a 2.2 your first semester back. Because your mind is just not in the game" [07]. Of course, being called to duty is just the beginning of the ordeal for service members as they prepare to deploy and live overseas.

For most participants in this study, serving halfway around the world was a unique experience and not necessarily negative. Labeled as the theme "serving overseas," the level of maturity exhibited by these student-veterans, especially when compared with their nonveteran counterparts in college, was in part due to their world travel and experiencing other cultures. One student, a regular Army veteran, talked about the effect that observing Iraqi university students had on him:

> I had a newfound motivation for school, for education . . . We were downtown in Baghdad and there had just been an attack downtown, right next to the university. It will really make you realize how we should value our freedom here, just to walk down the street without the worry of being shot

or blown up, and these students were walking to class, past
our convoy, and just with the biggest smiles on their face,
just so excited to go learn and go to school. [02]

For several of those interviewed, arriving in a war zone was a revela-
tion. One spoke about the lack of preparation and orientation once he
arrived:

They [welcoming authority] said, "Okay, this is where you're
sleeping, this is where your body armor's at, this is where
you're having briefings at, your liaison is over here. Good
luck." And they let you go. There was like two of us, and I
was the highest-ranking person. So, they're like, "Good
luck." I'm like, what? And they just took off. [11]

The findings show that the level of support provided for a transition,
such as the institutional-type support and aid function described by
Evans et al. (1998), varied widely among participants and shaped the
rest of their military experience.

Moving Through (Military)

Goodman et al. (1997) suggested, "moving through a transition
requires letting go of aspects of self, letting go of former roles, and
learning new roles" (p. 23). New roles for participants in this study
were certainly evident in the transcript data. In fact, it was at times
astounding, horrific, or gratifying to realize the disturbing situations
and positions in which some of our students found themselves. The
observation "war is hell" is attributed to Sherman, a Civil War gener-
al, and has meaning for some of the participants in this study. Several
cited the tension of war in the interviews, including narrow escapes
and near misses. One student-veteran, a Marine, recounted, "48 hours
after we arrived, our camp received indirect fire: one rocket actually
landed 100 meters outside my tent. That was a nice little welcome gift.
That was Iraq" [07]. Unfortunately, combat situations often result in
injury or death. Several students in our study faced grave experiences
in the war:

The first time [combat] was when I caught some shrapnel in
the face and in the neck . . . I was fine. I needed a stitch and

> some bandages. Then we had two other guys that had simi-
> lar injuries [when] we got hit with a pretty big one. and we
> had one soldier die. Eight of us were wounded. [03]

Other memorable events included those where an awareness of the
Iraqi people emerged. The Marine who experienced the rocket bomb-
ing mentioned earlier was also touched by the determination of the
locals. He reported:

> It really made me appreciate the Iraqi people. I got to see a
> totally different lifestyle. Actually, not really friendships that
> I made over there, but I came pretty close with some of
> them. Then, 2 weeks later, you would hear about those peo-
> ple being killed either in a car bomb or IED explosion, or
> just being taken by the Mushahadin. They were just people
> trying to earn a living and trying to make their nation as best
> as they can. [07]

As suggested earlier, the maturity level noted when interviewing these
students stems in part from an understanding of cultural differences
and empathy for the worldviews of others. This supports the notion
that veterans ought to receive educational credit, perhaps beyond health
and physical education, for knowledge gained because of their service.

In fact, several students expressed interest in earning college credit, a
theme that emerged and noted in Figure 1, for their military experi-
ence. Most suggested that the procedure for determining credits
seemed vague and confusing. One student described his experience
with the process: "I'm still kind of waiting on that to see exactly what
I'm going to get. You do get certain credits for just being in the Marine
Corps. You get transcripts and [the university] actually accepted 18 of
them. I have to see where they fit in my degree sheet" [14]. The fol-
lowing excerpt from another interview sheds light on the matter of
earning college credits:

> I: You mentioned that you didn't know anything about that
>   [credits].
> P: I've never heard of that, no. I would be interested, you
>   know.
> I: And nobody has told you about it either?
> P: No. [18]

Earning credits towards a college degree is just one of a myriad of minor issues and major challenges uncovered in this study. Some of the other transition factors emerged as student-veterans "moved out" of active duty military service.

Moving Out (Military)

All students interviewed in this study shared their experiences and ideas about transitioning from active duty, returning home, and gearing up for college. Goodman et al. (1997) suggested that an individual may experience feelings of grief during the "moving out" process. Furthermore, while these types of transitions often lead to growth, "decline is also a possible outcome, and many transitions may be viewed with ambivalence by the individuals experiencing them" (Evans et al., 1998, p. 112). The theme of "Moving Out" is a tool for categorizing the thoughts and ideas presented by study participants about the move toward civilian life. While difficult to generalize about the experiences of all the student-veterans in this study, three themes emerged (transition program, returning home, and academic preparation) and were categorized as "Moving Out."

For example, it was clear from the data that veterans view the military transition differently, mostly due to the wide variability in the quality of the programs themselves. Each branch has its own transition program and the emphases on mental health, educational benefits, and other topics vary widely. One student, a veteran of the National Guard, described the program this way: "We had a debriefing you know, to tell us, what you feel like, your feelings, you know, like mental scanning, mental screening and some stuff like that, (both) in Iraq and another one when I got back home [at the post]" [20]. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has a major role in transition, but the emphasis seems to be on retirees, as this Air Force veteran noted, "TAPS, Transition Assistance Program . . . we went through that program . . . but it was more beneficial for the guys who are retiring" [10]. Some "Moving Out" experiences were quite positive, including students being encouraged by transition personnel to register for college classes while still serving overseas.

Returning home proved challenging to some degree for all participants in the study. An Army veteran said, "It's kind of hard because your

family can't understand, and that's the worst part" [12]. Another shared his difficulties in transitioning:

> I remember when I first came home people were hugging me and all sorts of crap. It was one of those things. It was kinda [sic] nice. Now it feels very—what's the word I'm looking for?—unimportant. Something like that. The big transition was coming back from war into regular life. [11]

This participant elaborated further:

> When I came home I worked for about a year in a construction job, going to school at night because I was married. Eventually my wife left me for another person, so I really didn't have anything else left for me down there. And my cousins go here (to the university), two of my cousins go here. So I decided to go to school and leave that place behind. [12]

Others were faced with similar adjustment difficulties, especially strained or terminated relationships, and suggested they might consider going back to Iraq where a sense of camaraderie existed. Such feelings are consistent with the notion of grief during transition (Goodman et al., 1997). Another transition stressor exists because most student-veterans reported that military educational benefits do not provide enough resources to attend college full-time. Therefore, many in this population must face the prospect of somehow balancing work and school. A more detailed description of financial matters is found later in this section.

The data also reveal that academic preparation for college was deficient for many of the veteran students. This was consistent for both those returning to campus to resume their studies and those entering college for the first time. One returning student characterized his diminished skills by saying, "The math coming back was a big thing for me because when you don't use it, you lose it . . . I actually had to take a couple of refresher courses before I took my other courses to get where I needed to be" [10]. Some students rushed to enroll immediately upon returning from active duty without taking time for adjustment. Several students noted that a personal waiting period might have been helpful, including this Army veteran: "Right now, it's just

getting back on track, staying focused. I came back in December, and then I started right back to school in January. That was kind of hard. I don't think I was as focused as I should have been" [09]. Poor study habits and lack of focus, symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), were cited numerous times in the transcripts. Goodman et al. (1997) noted that even when the "moving out" transition is voluntary, there is likely to be a "process of mourning for the old ways" (p. 169). This process is further complicated by accompanying feelings of ambivalence that "make it hard to acknowledge the sense of loss" (p. 169). These are examples of the types of transitional issues that veterans bring with them when exiting the military and entering college.

Moving In (College)

As veterans appear on campus and begin or resume their civilian academic journey, an important theme, "connecting with peers," emerged as an issue. While the ages of the participants in this study were not drastically different from other students, there exists a difference in level of maturity that comes from wartime military service. One student, an Army veteran, noted, "I've just seen so much more than most of the college students here. I've traveled around the world. I've been given so much more responsibility and leadership. I feel that it's helped me out quite a bit" [13]. Several students even described irritation and impatience with their less mature civilian peers. A Marine commented:

> Most [students] kind of whine over nothing. They don't really know what it is to have a hard time . . . They don't have people screaming at them to get things done at three in the morning. They sit in a sheltered dorm room and do homework. It's not too hard. You hear people complaining and you're just like, why are you complaining? [14]

Several respondents indicated a desire to connect with other student-veterans. This can be accomplished informally, including using passer-by intuition ("You can always spot another veteran" [16]), or more formally, such as visiting the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) office ("[ROTC promotes] the military camaraderie, the life set, the sheer motivation" [07]). Most participants voiced interest in a student organization for veterans, an organization that they said did not currently exist on any of the campuses used in this study. Interestingly,

one student, a Marine who experienced extensive combat duty, sought peer connection by joining a fraternity: "I embraced [Greek life] simply because I didn't have anybody up here at the time. I tried it out, and those guys [fraternity brothers] found out about my situation and they embraced me" [06].

On the contrary, most also spoke of a socialization strategy best described as "blending in," a theme that surfaced from the interview data and listed in Figure 1. For example, an Air Force veteran in the study remarked, "I actually don't really like to stand out too much. I'm growing my hair out more . . . I don't like to give the jarhead appearance, because I am in college here and I want to be a college student" [04]. Of course, when other students do find out about their wartime service, awkward questions inevitably arise, such as this participant suggested: "They always end up asking me whether I killed somebody over there or not. That's a question I don't like people asking me, but, of course, my answer's 'no.' And I probably wouldn't tell them if I did" [13].

"Blending in" included being quiet and neutral in class. While it was clear in the interview data that many of the student-veterans held strong opinions about the war and geopolitics, overall they were reluctant to express themselves. This Army veteran explained:

> Because of the political sway of the college and most of the students here . . . sometimes you feel a little unwelcome because of your political views. Most soldiers are conservative . . . some of the students, especially in political science, like to attack the military and whatnot. [12]

Other students did not feel comfortable being called on in class because of their service experience. Faculty members who insisted on violating anonymity could make the veteran attempting to blend in feel uncomfortable:

> I had a professor in journalism class. He kept pushing me for information and some sort of insight as to my experiences in the military and he was just annoying. I just wanted him to shut up because that was gone and that's a different life. For me that was really annoying. I just, I kind of got to the point of dreading going to that class. [15]

Ironically, when one student in the study did voice modest opposition to the war in Iraq, he described being labeled as "one of those traitor-types" [11] by an editor from the campus newspaper. The veterans also described ambivalent relationships with faculty members. For example, several participants cited good relations with their instructors, especially those with military experience and backgrounds: "Dr. [name not shown] is another individual that I connected with really well. He spent a lot of time in the military, and he was my first professor back in the fall" [07]. Conversely, the stereotype of the adversarial roles of liberal professor and conservative veteran was described several times, including by this combat veteran who suffered a serious and disabling hand injury during active duty:

I was taking a sociology class this summer where he [the professor] basically referred to the American soldier as a terrorist. Those were his own words. And the military is wrong. This and that and the other thing. I think I failed the class because I refused to take his final exam. Because he was wording a question, he was making a theory of his as a question and turning it into fact and wanting me to agree with it by writing down what's right and wrong about the statement. And I refused to answer it. [12]

Of the sixteen themes identified in the study, as shown in Figure 1, a consistent message from the participants was that they hoped faculty members would acknowledge their veteran status and attempt to understand them as a student population. A comment from this Marine illustrates, "The biggest thing that I want to come into this interview and say is the fact that I think the faculty needs to know who we are. They need to know who we are. . . ." [06].

Unfortunately, misunderstandings about the needs of veterans extend beyond academic affairs to include campus units that are designed to serve students in an administrative capacity. For example, uneven quality of services provided by the local campus veteran's office emerged as a theme. One disgruntled student, the Army veteran with the disabled hand, characterized his experience this way:

There's nothing here [at this university] for veterans . . . I got no help. When I walked into the office it was empty and I was told I'd have to make an appointment. Which was kind

of weird because all the [staff] were sitting around drinking coffee. [12]

The emphasis of the local office appears to be on mostly financial matters, and other transitional issues were not adequately addressed. This is a key finding and central to the discussion to follow. One student noted, "They [local campus office] mainly focused on the financials, in my opinion. I wish there could be something to assist in the transition. I definitely could have used it" [04]. Seeking help in financial matters at the local campus office is important for veterans, but of equal significance is the transition back into the larger campus community. Some faced difficulty just getting started. For example:

Getting to college [did not go smoothly] . . . I think it's because I forgot to start filling out my forms, or I wasn't filling them out in a timely manner. I don't know what it was, but they [college staff] didn't like me. [11]

Finances became a consistent theme for many participants in this study. For example, unless the veteran is severely wounded or disabled and receives extra support, GI Bill benefits are not sufficient for veterans to attend school full-time without working. One student-veteran noted, "More than anything, financially, I thought to myself, 'how am I going to pull this one off?' I know that I have all these goals, I knew I would get the GI bill, but I knew I would have to get a job and on top of that, I would try to get some sort of scholarship" [10]. This group is especially vulnerable to working too much at the peril of their studies, particularly when considering the problems of academic preparation described earlier.

In order to grasp the significance of financial matters to this student group, consider that some participants suggested reenlisting as Guard or Reserve just to keep benefits. This is remarkable considering each had done at least one tour in combat zone and reenlisting might mean returning to active duty in the Middle East. One student, a member of the National Guard, characterized it this way, "I reenlisted to keep my benefits . . . I was hoping to get my schoolwork done in four. But I didn't get it all finished and then had a year and a half overseas, so I had to reenlist to get the rest of my benefits" [20].

Several participants noted that delayed benefits payments, mostly due to an imposing federal system and bureaucratic "red-tape," caused unnecessary stress. Under these circumstances, student-veterans had to pay their tuition bill upfront, perhaps using a high interest rate credit card, and then wait for reimbursement. "Oh, it's horrible. I sent my paperwork a year ago and I'm not even sure if it's coming in yet, to tell you the truth. I checked a month ago and it still wasn't in" [01], said one student. Another noted, "It took a whole semester. It can hold you up. When I got here, I paid [out of pocket] for tuition and books. I got it back later on" [05]. Presumably, a successful student-veteran learns to "work the system," as this participant, a National Guard veteran, acknowledged:

> I do them [sources for college funding] in order. My [state] tuition waiver first and I have Pell Grant. So then the Pell Grant's pay out, which comes to me, the [state scholarship] pays for extra fees that the waiver doesn't cover, [such as] health fees and stuff like that . . . and my GI money is rent. So, I work the system really well. [21]

Health issues emerged as an important topic in the study, including students with disabilities and mental health problems such as PTSD. Three of the 25 participants had documented disabilities, including this Army veteran and amputee: "I got my leg blown off. So, normally I just don't wear shorts. You can't even tell. It doesn't bother me. Very rarely do people say anything about it. No one will mention it unless I bring it up" [03]. Because so many combat troops today survive battle with injuries (particularly due to rapid response and advances in medicine), data in the transcripts pointed to an unprecedented number of disabled student-veterans coming to campus in the next few years, as described by this Marine:

> If we have 200 more veterans coming [to this campus] in the next years, how many of those veterans are going to be disabled? We already don't have enough handicapped parking . . . So how are we going to handle those people coming back? [Many] of them might have some kind of walking disability that requires a handicapped parking spot. [06]

Unfortunately, the implication by several participants was that current staffing levels at the campus disabilities office are not ready for a large

increase in clients. In addition to increased numbers of students with physical disabilities, mental health problems associated with anger and PTSD among veterans are sure to be present as well.

Moreover, several students talked about carrying a sense of resentment and anger. "We've all got anger issues" [20], suggested a participant, the same one mentioned previously who remains in the National Guard to retain education benefits. Difficulties associated with anger also affected peer involvement as this Army veteran noted:

> You can even ask my roommate . . . when I left I was a lot more interpersonal. Apparently I've got this mean, scowling look all the time where I frighten certain people away. Which is something I'm working on mainly because, you know, I want to get a date. You can't be mean like that. [11]

The findings in this study—including the 16 themes, quotes from students, and use of Schlossberg's transition theory as a guide—combined to provide useful background information for considering how campus professionals can better prepare to receive veterans who enroll in college.

Implications for Practice

Findings from this study point to the need for a comprehensive and holistic system for assisting veterans; such an arrangement was not found at the three sample universities. For example, the financial aid office was used as sole entry "portal." Not only does this not adequately meet the veteran's needs, it does not align with calls for inclusiveness and community by Boyer (1990) and others (Blimling & Whitt, 1999; Kuh et al., 2006). A successful holistic strategy for working with this emerging student population is both intentional and purposeful, including identification of each student-veteran and follow-up in order to provide ongoing services. How can colleges and universities undertake to provide this type and level of service? Figure 2 depicts a model for developing a holistic approach for assisting these students.

Figure 2
Holistic Approach for Assisting Student Veterans
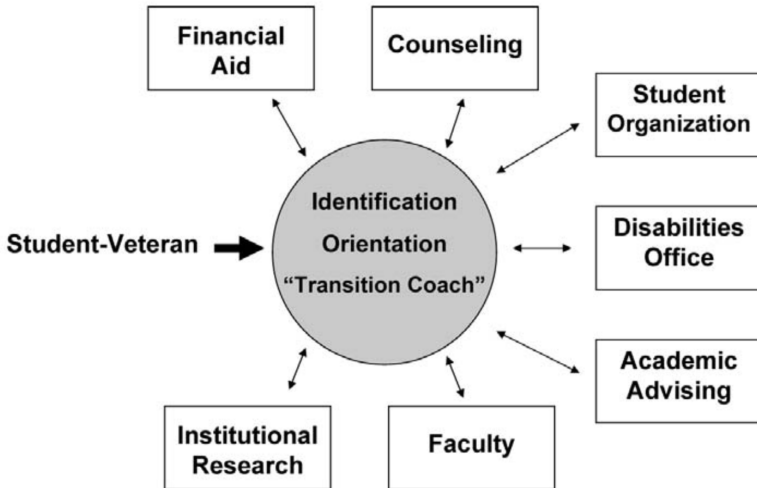
As shown in Figure 2, identification of each student-veteran is the key to coordinating the efforts of campus professionals across functional areas including academic affairs, student life, and central administration. Of course, identification should be voluntary, but because many of these students want to keep a low profile, a reasonable amount of pressure should be exerted to identify as many as possible to ensure an inclusive campus program for veterans. Otherwise it will be difficult to coordinate the efforts of disparate units such as counseling, academic support, disabilities office, and other functions across campus and, thus, troublesome to provide a holistic approach. While it is true that veterans are typically used to being told what to do, a hallmark of military regimen, the task of establishing a registry in college should be viewed as an effort to give these students a voice in their own education and an active role in their transition to college.

A mandatory orientation designed for incoming student-veterans (or a focused session within the general student orientation) is one method for achieving the important identification task. Once the veteran has self-identified, campus professionals working in functional areas

beyond financial aid, including academic affairs, can participate in assisting student-veterans. This identification should be a simple registry and not an elaborate electronic database, which might be perceived as overly intrusive, thus violating privacy. To increase participation rates the institution should make an effort to advertise the benefits of registering as a veteran. Once identification-registration is complete, units on campus that will serve the student can be notified and play a part in assistance.

The findings in this study suggest a classic scenario in which a mentor or "transition coach" can be most useful for the student-veteran. The job description for a transition coach can be flexible and tailored to meet the needs at a particular institution. Generally, this person will help the veteran deal with administrative hurdles, offer academic advice, and provide support for the emotional aspects of a transition to civilian life. Former military personnel, especially those who have served in combat, are likely to prove most helpful in such an initiative. The good news is that there is likely a willing pool of candidates ready to volunteer to assist, including students, staff, and faculty. Consideration should be given to having veterans work, perhaps as volunteers, in some of the key campus offices where the new students seek services.

In addition to coaching, academic advising personnel should be alerted to the names of student-veterans through the registry. This is a proactive method to anticipate and address concerns about academic preparation and diminished skills. Training should be provided for advisors to work with this unique population. For example, are advisors familiar with the institutional policy on military transcripts? Are advisors prepared to assist veterans should they need to withdraw from classes or for readmission to the academic program once they return from deployment? Moreover, are advisors cognizant of the requirements of military education benefits, including stipulations that the student must be matriculating toward a degree to receive maximum financial assistance? In partnership with student affairs and central administration, much can and should be done in this area, and the findings from this study indicate academic advising is a critical piece of a holistic approach for working with student-veterans.

As indicated in Figure 2, faculty members are part of this effort, too. Results from this study indicate that these students desire to have their instructors understand and acknowledge them. A consistent theme in the data suggested that these students do not desire special status or unusual accommodations, but rather a sense that their professors appreciate their life circumstances, including both health and academic challenges. Professional development opportunities for college instructors are needed to help them better understand the needs of this emerging student group. It would be helpful for personnel from the campus disabilities office to play a role in efforts to train faculty members in this endeavor.

The health of college students, both physical and mental, continues to be an important concern (American College Health Association, 2005; Arehart-Treichel, 2002). As of May 2007, 25,783 military personnel have been injured in Iraq (iCasualties.org, 2007). In addition, it is estimated that greater than 30% of returning veterans have need for mental health support (Defense Health Board, 2007). Are colleges and universities prepared to provide services to students who have physical disabilities and/or may be experiencing adjustment, stress, or PTSD issues? Do students know how to access those services?

Following the Vietnam War, veterans were described as "alienated," "hurting," and in need of psychological help (Lifton, 1992, p. 35)— descriptions similar to some of those found in this study. How can counseling professionals communicate to today's veterans that mental health is dealt with differently by colleges than by the military? Another challenge is to make faculty members and other campus personnel aware of procedures for making referrals and to whom referrals are made. Undoubtedly, additional research in the area of student-veteran mental health is needed.

A student organization is one means for veterans to connect with peers and nurture a sense of camaraderie. A visible, campus-based student-veterans organization could provide opportunities for veterans to meet with students who have had similar experience while also serving as a point of connection to the campus. Because students who are veterans of combat are very mission-oriented, a tendency learned in the military, they are excellent candidates for service learning opportunities.

Student life professionals should view this student population as an untapped resource on campus, one that is ready "for mobilization" in a variety of ways. Again, a registry is critical for identifying potential volunteers.

A subgroup of student veterans that deserves special attention is women. Substantial numbers of women, one in seven troops in 2005, are serving in Iraq (Wertheimer, 2005). Over the next decade, campus professionals will be working with increasing numbers of female veterans. Because combat action in this war can occur anywhere, both women and men in this study experienced similar things and the interview data yielded no dramatic differences in their stories. However, two important subthemes emerged from talking with women veterans: financial strain and sexual violence. All the female participants in this study spoke of financial needs, both in terms of why they originally joined the military and the realties of their current fiscal situation. Several participants were single mothers, a group particularly vulnerable to financial problems. One woman spoke of harassment and the constant threat of sexual assault in the military and subsequent feelings of mistrust and anger, emotions she brings with her to the campus community. It should be noted, however, that financial need and sexual assault are issues that many "civilian" women students face as well.

Central administration should also have a role in this endeavor, particularly in the area of accountability and student success. For example, institutional researchers should make every effort to collect data and track the progress of this emerging population of students. Reporting on the academic success of student-veterans is important for both continuous program improvement efforts and accountability purposes. This is another reason why veteran status needs to be included in the student unit record. Otherwise, it will be nearly impossible to gauge the success a college, university, or system is having in working with and assisting student-veterans.

Conclusion

This study was an effort to learn about the transitions combat veterans make when they return home and come to campus as students. The

findings confirm that this group is a special needs population and suggest that there are ways for colleges and universities to work with these students to meet those needs. For many participants in this study, the transition to college was among the most difficult adjustments to be made when returning from wartime service. Students pointed to relearning study skills, connecting with peers, and financial concerns as major aspects of the adjustment process. Given the potential that global conflicts may continue and troop levels will likely swell to meet these challenges, postsecondary institutions should plan for increased numbers of student-veterans on campus. It would be a disservice to treat this student population as if it were invisible.

Appendix A: Interview Script

Note from researchers: In order to elicit authentic accounts about the subjective experiences of veterans returning to campus, interviews will be conducted according to a semistructured protocol known as "active interviewing" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). In terms of structure and formality, active interviewing falls somewhere between rigid-traditional interviewing and the free-form, such as story-telling or narrative interviewing. The key to active interviewing is to gain rapport with respondents and avoid manipulating them or their answers. These questions will be asked:

Talk about why you joined the service; when and where did you join; had you attended college before joining the service; if so, where?

Tell me a little about where you are from and your military service.
   Home state; Branch of service; Officer or enlisted; Dates of active duty; Current military status

Please describe your service in Iraq/Afghanistan.
   When did your war zone service begin; where were you stationed; how many tours; how long were you there; what did you do?

Please describe your current college experiences.
   After leaving the service, why did you decide to attend college; what are your goals for attending college; did your military service shape the way you think about college; did you anticipate or face any adjustments in going to college after having been in a war zone; do you think that because of your military service you experience college differently than most other students; if so, why/in what ways?

Have you talked with other students or with faculty members about your military service; do you bring it up in class discussions; do many people on campus know you are a wartime veteran?

> How do other students and faculty members respond to your wartime experiences; do you know other veterans on this campus; if so, do you ever get together with them; what do those relationships mean to you?

What needs to happen so that this campus is better prepared to enroll veterans as students? What campus services or support systems not yet available would help veterans as they become college students?

Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experiences that I have not asked?

Do you have any questions for me?

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