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Role Exit from the Military: Student Veterans' Perceptions of Transitioning from the U.S. Military to Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper presents a qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with eleven student veterans about transitioning from the U.S. military to civilian life and to a midsized, public university. The U.S. military and American institutions of higher education are significantly different, and these differences make adaptation for student veterans more difficult. The purpose of this research was to understand what this transition was like for student veterans and the factors that affected how they negotiated the move back home. Using framework analysis (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994), we noted five themes of student veterans' military service that impacted their transition: (a) task cohesion; (b) military structure; (c) military responsibilities and release anxiety; (d) combat experience; and (e) social cohesion in combat units. We describe each of these themes and explain how they influenced student veterans' experiences in school. We conclude with suggested policy implications for institutions of higher education. Keywords: Military, Combat, Student Veterans, Higher Education, Total Institution, Role Exit, Framework Analysis.

Keywords

qualitative research

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This paper presents a qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with eleven student veterans about transitioning from the U.S. military to civilian life and to a midsized, public university. The U.S. military and American institutions of higher education are significantly different, and these differences make adaptation for student veterans more difficult. The purpose of this research was to understand what this transition was like for student veterans and the factors that affected how they negotiated the move back home. Using framework analysis (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994), we noted five themes of student veterans' military service that impacted their transition: (a) task cohesion; (b) military structure; (c) military responsibilities and release anxiety; (d) combat experience; and (e) social cohesion in combat units. We describe each of these themes and explain how they influenced student veterans' experiences in school. We conclude with suggested policy implications for institutions of higher education. Keywords: Military, Combat, Student Veterans, Higher Education, Total Institution, Role Exit, Framework Analysis.

Since 1944, the U.S. government has provided U.S. military veterans with financial assistance for attending college through the GI Bill of Rights, and these educational benefits have been a popular incentive for military enlistment ever since the end of the draft in 1973 (McMurray, 2007; Olson, 1973). In fact, "educational benefits" was the most commonly cited reason for joining the military in the beginning of the Global War on Terror (GWT; U.S. General Accounting Office, 2001). The passage of the Post-9/11 GI Bill in August 2009 improved educational benefits for veterans, and over half a million veterans of the GWT and their dependents have used these educational benefits (Cook & Kim, 2009). Forty-five percent of all GWT veterans under the age of 30 have attended college as either full-time or part-time students since 2011 (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011). For many of the 2.3 million veterans returning from the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, going to college has been a popular method of reintegration (Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, 2010).

However, the military and higher education vary in several respects that can make the transition more difficult. Whereas military personnel lack control over their daily lives and must comply with military authority figures' orders, college students have much greater choice over how they live their lives. And while the military expects service members to meet institutional goals by banding together through task cohesion, college typically involves working independently to meet individual goals.

Thus, the nation-wide entrance of military veterans onto college and university campuses has introduced a new kind of experiential diversity into higher educational settings. Because student engagement and integration predict student success in college (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2010), researchers have directed their attention toward the adjustment of veterans in higher educational settings and toward ways of minimizing any possible *culture clashes* (Glasser, Powers, & Zywiak, 2009). Student veterans often have different sets of life experiences than most college students, which engenders their unique perspective both inside and outside the classroom (Cook & Kim, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). In

addition, student veterans with combat experience often suffer from emotional or physical injuries, leading to increased alienation on campus (Elliott, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2011).

The transition from the military to higher education institutions presents a number of challenges, including adapting to a new environment and new role expectations, and incorporating the identity of student into the identity of veteran (i.e., becoming a *student veteran*). This study elucidates these challenges via a qualitative analysis of eleven in-depth interviews with veterans who recently underwent the transition to college themselves.

Theoretical Framework

The U.S. Military: Total Institution

The military is much like what Erving Goffman (1961) termed a *total institution,* which also includes prisons, mental asylums, and convents. All are places where large numbers of individuals live and work together and are physically separated from larger society for some period of time (Goffman, 1961). Inside,

1) all aspects of life are conducted under a single authority,
2) each phase of daily activity is carried out in the immediate company of a large "batch" of others,
3) breaking formal regulations typically results in immediate punishment, and
4) members are excluded from knowledge of the decisions taken regarding their fate (Goffman).

Entering most total institutions, including the military, entails a loss of self-determination and autonomy. New-comers' self-conceptions are immediately disrupted and replaced with ones more suitable for life within the institution. Ultimately, the newcomer must become passive and controlled, allowing him or herself "to be shaped and coded into an object that can be fed into the administrative machinery or the establishment" (Goffman, 1961, p. 16).

Only Zurcher (1965) has explicitly applied the concept of total institutions to research on the military. He studied a naval vessel at sea, noting that it was isolated from society, that its instrumental purpose was decided by the U.S. Department of the Navy, that work was performed 24 hours-a-day under the authority of the ship's Captain, and that its sailors did not know the destination of their ship until it is well out to sea (Zurcher, 1965). Furthermore, he found that subsequent to basic training, navy recruits were conferred enormous responsibilities including protecting their comrades' lives such as by "standing watch" (Zurcher). Such inter-dependence fostered a sense of camaraderie that helped to ensure that the instrumental goals of the institution would be met (Zurcher).

The concept of the total institution has been criticized for combining nonequivalent institutions into a single category, when in reality each type exerts a different level of control over its members (Davies, 1989). In fact, the military is unlike other total institutions in several respects. Today, individuals voluntarily enlist in the U.S. military, are compensated for their work, are given responsibilities, and are often recognized for their service, such that the military does not make "total" claims on its members. Whereas the military once employed "barracks-style" living, akin to the "batch living" of total institutions, today it allows its personnel to live off-base and accommodates families so as to increase recruitment for the all-volunteer military force (Segal, 1986). Furthermore, in most total institutions camaraderie is discouraged for fear of an uprising (Goffman, 1961) but in the military, social cohesion is encouraged because it allows its members to live and work together more effectively (MacCoun & Hix, 2010).

Nonetheless, the military is still characterized as a "greedy institution" which demands commitment, time and energy (Segal, 1986). In particular, combat in the GWT is unpredictable and uncontrollable with no boundaries separating dangerous and safe areas. Even designated safe or "green" zones are subject to constant mortar attacks (Lafferty, Alford, Davis, & O'Connor, 2008). Subsequent to being exposed to such extreme conditions, many returning veterans must disengage from thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that were adaptive in a war zone, but inappropriate in the civilian world.

Role Exit: Becoming Veterans

When active duty military personnel become veterans, they must undergo a process of role exit in which they disengage from a role central to their identity and replace it with a new one (Ebaugh, 1988). Numerous role exits occur in contemporary life, such as by becoming an ex-spouse, or an ex-convict. People often incorrectly assume that such life transitions operate "with little disruption to individual lives or to social structure" (George, 1993, p. 355), not realizing that they will be judged by both their current role performance, and by their performance in the role they just exited (Ebaugh, 1988).

Although 57% of the U.S. public personally knows a military veteran, their contact with active-duty and veteran personnel of the Global War on Terror is much more limited (Pew Research Center, 2011). In the past decade of war, the U.S. military has been comprised of only 0.5% of the national population (Pew Research Center, 2011) such that a majority of U.S. citizens have little or no contact with military service members (Segal & Segal, 2004). As a result, returning veterans are often surrounded by civilians and even by other veterans who are completely unfamiliar with their experiences. Even though people's attitudes toward GWT veterans are generally positive (Saad, 2006), veterans are still likely to be confronted with ignorance, curiosity, and stereotypes (Ebaugh, 1988).

Role exit is a unique transition because it involves simultaneously learning a new role or position while withdrawing from the values, norms, and expectations of a previous role (Ebaugh, 1988). The importance of disengagement is magnified in cases where the expectations of a previous role would be unnecessary, inappropriate, or even criminal in the new role (Ebaugh, 1988). For combat veterans in particular, many of the conditioned and normative behaviors of the military such as hyper-vigilance, aggression, paranoia are dysfunctional in civilian life (Borus, 1975). The challenge of role exit for veterans is compounded by the fact that expectations of their previous role are often deeply embedded into their self-concepts and especially difficult to relinquish (Turner, 1978; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979).

Before explaining how we conducted this research and what we discovered, we will first explain *why* we conducted this research. The first author's interest in this topic was sparked by a close family member's return from combat duty in Iraq in 2007 and his struggles reintegrating into civilian life and attending a four-year college. In witnessing his challenging transition home, it was difficult to feel connected to him, let alone understand his experience. This led to her broader interest in what impacted veterans' transitions home and into higher education, as well as what colleges and universities were doing to assist student veterans. The interest of the second author was born of exposure to student veterans in her classroom who reported varying degrees of stress and emotional challenges in college. These compelling individuals led us both to expect to discover mostly negative effects of war on student veterans, and instead we uncovered a great deal of variation in veterans' experiences in the military and in their transitions home and in college as well.

Methods

We conducted a qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews conducted by the first author in 2010 with eleven student veterans who had served in the U.S. Armed Forces since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, who had been deployed overseas, and who had a wide range of military experiences. The student veterans had recently graduated from, were currently enrolled in, or were soon transferring to a mid-sized, Western, public university from a local community college. After we obtained Institutional Review Board approval from the university, we recruited participants non-randomly by introducing the purpose of the study and distributing flyers during meetings of the school's student veterans' organization and by leaving flyers at the university's student veterans' services office.

During each interview, the first author asked each participant open-ended questions that had been pre-tested by the first participant. The interviews were semi-structured with a set of questions about experiences in the military and transitions back into civilian life and into college that were general enough to allow participants to choose how much and what kind of information to disclose and to describe their experiences in their own words. The first author conducted the interviews in private locations, which lasted thirty to sixty minutes. After transcribing the interviews, the first author destroyed the audio-recordings and assigned pseudonyms to each participant so as to maintain their anonymity.

We analyzed the transcriptions using framework analysis (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994), which is guided by a priori theories and allows for themes to emerge directly from the data (Lacey & Luff, 2009; Rabiee, 2004). Framework analysis includes five systematic steps:

1) familiarization;
2) identifying a thematic framework;
3) indexing;
4) charting; and
5) mapping and interpretation (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994).

We chose framework analysis because it allows for both inductive and deductive reasoning and offers a straightforward yet comprehensive set of procedures to analyze complex, detailed interview transcripts.

Familiarization entailed repeatedly reading the transcriptions to become immersed in the data. Identifying a thematic framework consisted of noting examples of total institutions and role exit, as well as discovering new themes that emerged across multiple narratives. Indexing involved color-coding text indicative of specific themes with unique colors (Lacey & Luff, 2009). Charting entailed creating a digital chart in which rows represented participants, columns represented themes, and cells contained color-coded text indicative of each theme. Lastly, mapping and interpretation involved analyzing patterns, differences, and associations among the themes during which similarities and differences between participants' experiences of role exit were identified. During this process, we maintained quality control by meeting regularly to compare our reactions to specific texts thereby allowing for the emergence of a joint understanding of the underlying themes and their inter-relationships.

Results

Military Life and its Effects on the Transition to College

The following themes emerged from the participants' narratives:
1) the military's emphasis on task cohesion;

2) military structure;
3) military responsibilities and release anxiety;
4) combat experience; and
5) social cohesion in combat units.

We also discuss how each theme relates to veterans' transitions into college.

Military task cohesion

The military demands that its members de-individuate and work together on tasks, developing a sense of *task cohesion* which served student veterans well later on as college students, even if it didn't describe their non-veteran student counterparts. After enlistment, there is a process of divestiture wherein one's appearance, behaviors, and thoughts are re-modeled. For example, Steve said that during basic training "they basically break you down and then rebuild you into what they need." As Will explained, having his name replaced by a number that designated his position in his unit had an underlying purpose: "there's no individualism when you're going for the mission - it's a team effort." Via a process of leveling individual differences through haircuts, uniforms and minimal, military-issued personal affects, internal competition was limited so that the recruits could focus on collaborating against a common enemy. According to Dennis:

> You do all of your training together, you know, when you go to the field you're around each other 24/7. And you know…you depend on each other. It's really team-work oriented; everything you do you do in a team.

Experiencing this level of task cohesion imparted lessons to student veterans that later benefited them as college students, such as putting others before themselves and working hard so as to not disappoint teammates. For example, Laura explained how the Navy taught her to be aware of her surroundings and to be particularly conscious of how her actions affected others:

> I think it's that awareness you get when you're older too, but I think you get it really quick when you have a lot of people watching you. And the military everyone's watching you. 'Cause you watch each other, you know like your shipmates, you're hard on each other. If you look like crap...it reflects on everyone.

The actual behavior of non-veteran college students often disgusted student veterans expressly because it lacked these elements of task cohesion. Laura bemoaned how most students on campus behaved disrespectfully of others without an awareness of their surroundings, such as by talking about private information on their phones in close earshot of others. In contrast, she felt she took college more seriously, treating it like a job, and only missing class if she was "bleeding out of her eyeballs" so as not to let down the American taxpayers who were funding her education.

Military task cohesion also taught the participants the importance of being engaged in the classroom. For example, Will explained:

> I found, it was one of the weirdest things of class, one of my first classes where the teacher would be like, "alright what do you guys think about this?" And nobody said anything! Taking that back into the Marine Corp, if we were in a mission briefing or something and somebody asked, "what do you think about

this," or you know, "does anyone not understand this?" you would be the exception if you *didn't* respond.

In the military everyone has to understand the instructions for an assignment or the group's outcome suffers, whereas in the college setting, not every student understands the instructions and their own work suffers. Engagement was necessary for surviving within the military institution and in combat, and student veterans seem to easily transfer that skill to the classroom to their own benefit.

Military structure

The military has a great deal of control over its members' lives through rules, regulations, intolerance of deviation, and punishments for failure to conform. While veterans are accustomed to receiving clear information, in the civilian world they have to learn on their own how to navigate institutional structures and how to disentangle communication for pertinent information. For example, military leaders issue direct and unambiguous orders whereas college course assignments can be vague and open-ended. In the words of Adam, [in the military] "you're told what to do; everything's simple." Similarly, in Sam's experience, everything in the military was "very black and white" and "there's a sense of clarity to life over there that you don't get in this world, and when you come back, and try to negotiate this terrain, and uh.... it doesn't make sense..." Rachel also missed the structured aspect of military life, explaining how she had come to expect receiving direct orders:

> In the Army you do something wrong, someone yells at you. You don't take it personally; you get used to people just....correcting you by screaming at you, and it's not personal...for a long time I wished I could be in an environment again where people were just direct.

Whereas the military instructs its members how to navigate bureaucratic formalities, the corresponding lack of institutional support in the civilian life left veterans feeling lost in the process of obtaining their GI benefits that they have earned through service. As Tom explained,

> If you don't like, pursue your benefits, then like…nobody's gonna tell you about them. Nobody's ganna do it for you…and nobody's gonna answer your questions unless you take the initiative to do it. And that's the same with like your GI benefits. They say your like, base-education office or whatever's gonna help you, but they're not gonna help you. You gotta kinda like, put your foot in the door, and really like knock on it and try to get all the information that you can if you want to go to school.

Chris, an Army mechanic, also described the military as highly structured and scheduled and how much he missed the corresponding efficiency: "Any time there's any issue or any problem....it gets resolved immediately. Like, you tell somebody about it, problem gets fixed...any time anything happens." However, he was able to turn his preference for the military structure in his favor as a college-student:

> Coming back going to school really helped out, because like you have a set schedule, you know, you have classes that you have to go to...and like I had a

work schedule and a school schedule...just having that structure or every day schedule really helps transition back into it.

Military responsibilities and release anxiety

Although the military removes many of the freedoms granted in the civilian world, it also grants young adults tremendous responsibility practically overnight, and veterans are often very proud of their time in the service. As Sam put it: "I was responsible for people's lives. So I had an enormous amount of responsibility and with that comes, you know, I was proud of what I did." However, when their accomplishments are not recognized in the civilian world, it can be deeply demoralizing.

The competencies recognized in the military are often considered insufficient by civilian institutional standards; for example, universities do not necessarily grant academic credit for military training, regardless of individual experience and ability. As a result, veterans often feel like they have to start over as if they had not accomplished anything. As Laura said, "you've been in a while, you have subordinates, you have responsibilities, you've stayed out of trouble. You know, you've accomplished a lot" yet "when you move back to civilian life, it's like all that's gone. So you kind of start over…"

Goffman (1961) contended that individuals leaving the military may experience "release anxiety" because their discharge typically occurs when the member has finally "learned the ropes on the inside" and earned status and responsibilities. Whereas inside the institution they may feel like "a big fish in a little pond," re-entering civilian life may feel like becoming "a little fish in a big pond."

Goffman's (1961) metaphor aptly describes the feeling of successfully executing enormous responsibilities in the military, only to be stripped of them state-side and sent to the end of the line to start training from scratch. For example, Dennis literally saved lives in Iraq, but would have to complete years of schooling to work in a medical profession in the civilian world: "You get a lot of responsibility at a really young age…and you kinda get used to it. And then you get out and no one trusts you with anything. So that's kind of difficult." Going on, leaving the military "feels like a big part of you is missing, you know. 'Cause it's like it's not just part of your life; it's who you are. It's not just your occupation."

Combat experience

Combat veterans adapt to ubiquitous danger though emotions (e.g., fear), cognitions (e.g., thinking something benign is dangerous), and behaviors (e.g., eliminating the sources of threat) that are necessary for survival though difficult to relinquish once the threat is no longer real. Once returned to civilian life such adaptations are typically unnecessary or in some cases even criminal. Nine of the eleven participants were deployed to combat areas, and each experienced combat to varying degrees depending on the number and location(s) of their deployment(s), and their specific jobs, or "Military Occupations Specialties". We did not directly ask the participants about their combat experiences so as to respect their privacy (Lafferty et al., 2008), yet several spoke spontaneously about them. Their narratives revealed that once they left the military, those who were exposed to the most combat had the greatest difficulty withdrawing from the expectations of a former role. For example, Adam described his combat role and later transition out of the military as follows: "it's like being a sanctioned criminal. You know, pretty much. I know that sounds crazy but…if you did what we were trained to do, you'd be a criminal" whereas in civilian life, "things get real grey" when stimuli associated with combat trigger inappropriate reactions.

Sam and Dennis both reported combat exposure, and had both been diagnosed with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Sam said that his hyper-vigilance during combat re-wired his brain, such that back home, he misinterpreted stimuli as more threatening than they really were, resulting in "a number of good scrapes." Their combat experiences left both of them traumatized and in need of escape, such that Dennis used alcohol to deal with his night terrors and Sam used methamphetamine to avoid sleep altogether.

Combat experiences also caused these student veterans to feel vastly different from their civilian peers. As Hank described:

> The whole class atmosphere is great, but it's just the whole thing kind of…I don't know, I'm at a very different age than everyone else, and my mentality is totally different from my experiences, so, sometimes it's a little hard to get used to all the young individuals there, but it is what it is.

Dennis, who worked as a medic treating combat wounded, agreed:

> It's just like, really just a bunch of kids…and it's like, I don't know. I hear people say dumb stuff a lot. I definitely feel different from people 'cause most people haven't been shot at like eighty times and been blown up more than once, or seen car bombs go off. Most people...they don't know what it's like to be around stuff like that. It makes you feel a little different. It was kind of hard making new friends. It's hard finding people that actually understand the kind of stuff that you've gone through. There aren't that many infantry veterans around.

In contrast, the student veterans who were in support positions reported easier transitions into college, such as Rachel: "I just go to class, I participate, other people participate..." Since nothing she did in the military was unacceptable in civilian life, she did not feel her military experiences disconnected her from anyone in college.

Social cohesion

Social cohesion is the degree to which members of a group like each other and feel emotionally close, and the memory of it was particularly strong among student veterans who had been in combat units. While social cohesion served a valuable purpose in combat, the intensity of it at the time made it difficult later on for student veterans to feel like anyone in the civilian world, including at college, could understand them.

According to Adam, infantry units "are like wolf packs" in which individuals entrust their lives to their comrades, creating a sense of interdependence and emotional closeness that is unlike that which occurs in non-combat units. Upon discharge from the military, it feels as if all this is lost. As Hank expressed:

> ...there's a lot of things you have to let go of that was really hard. I mean you come from an area where you've got guys that you trust, literally with your…you trust them with your life, you know? You trust them with your life.

In fact, social cohesion was often what the combat veterans in this study valued most about their military experiences. As Sam described, "it's a different type of relationship... so it's impossible to make the experience translate, but, most people can understand the concept of going through something extremely difficult with somebody, and there being a bond created."

According to Dennis, the military platoon acts as a surrogate family in that, "everybody's pretty close. It's close like you're close to family. Everyone shares what they have, you know, you live together…" Adam described his relationship with some of his comrades as the closest kind of bond, and in comparison everyone at home feels distant:

> It's like you have a real, true connection with other people- you know, the people in your unit. It's like... there's so much going on that's unspoken. You know what I mean? Like, and you come back here and there's...everybody else is sort of…they're ambiguous. You don't really know where they stand, you don't really know what they believe...you don't really know what they've been through.

When military veterans return home, they leave the people who best understand what they have been through and are surrounded by individuals who are unfamiliar with their previous experiences. As Dennis explained, "when you get out it, it's a big shock being on your own all of a sudden." Even if veterans are surrounded by social support, they may still feel alone if no one can relate to their experiences. Indeed, military discharge presents the possibility of leaving those individuals who best understand what they have gone through.

Discussion

Our data analysis revealed that student veterans' transitions from the military to civilian life are influenced by a number of military-related factors, including the degree of collective cohesion emphasized in the military, the clear structure of the military, and whether they were in an infantry or a support role in the military. In some ways these aspects of their military service made college life easier to adapt to, whereas in other ways they complicated their transition.

Unlike capitalist society, which largely focuses on the individual, the military operates through collective effort. For tasks to be accomplished and for individuals to survive within the military, putting the team ahead of oneself is necessary. Each member working on a task needs to be informed of operation details, meaning that they must be engaged. This readiness to be engaged seemed to translate well into the college classroom, an environment that also requires engagement for success.

Student veterans had become accustomed to the military's structure and adapting to the relatively free environment of the university was difficult. After years of service, many had become used to military officials telling them what to do, when and where to do it, and how to do it. Leaving that structure meant becoming more self-reliant, self-disciplined and more organized in taking the initiative to accomplish things and entering a world in which communication was less direct, more ambiguous and seemingly less efficient.

Another aspect of these student veterans' experience was that the military had given them a great deal of responsibility very quickly at a young age, sometimes even leaving them responsible for other peoples' lives, of which they were very proud. However, they could not translate them into the civilian world because the university did not offer credit for military training, insinuating that their military training was sub-par and must be repeated. Thus, role exit from the military to the university entailed starting over, regardless of what one had accomplished in the service, which was often demoralizing.

One more theme that emerged from the narratives was that combat veterans experienced more intense bonds with their comrades compared to student veterans in support roles, which left them feeling more isolated when they got out because it seemed like no one could relate to their military experiences. Put differently, the greater the social cohesion they

felt while in the military, the more difficult was their transition into civilian life. While student veterans in non-combat positions felt different from their younger civilian peers owing to their life experiences, they did not express the same feelings of disconnection, and appeared to have much smoother transitions from the military to higher education.

The current study supported the findings of previous research that the transition back into civilian life was more of a struggle for Vietnam veterans who had been exposed to relatively more combat (Borus, 1975). It also supported more current research findings that Post 9/11 student veterans feel different and disconnected from their civilian peers and sometimes feel unfairly judged on campus (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Elliott, 2014; Elliott, Gonzalez, & Larsen 2011). However, unlike most studies about student veterans' transitions from the military to higher education, the current study approached the topic from an institutional perspective. We explored how differences in institutional purposes, settings and practices from the military to higher educational institutions affected individuals' transitions from one to the other.

Strengths and Limitations

Because this was a small sample from a specific school, the findings cannot be generalized beyond the sample population, nor can they be used to describe veterans of other wars, student veterans in general, or all student veterans at the university they were sampled from. The data are also from a group of student veterans who volunteered for the study, meaning more socially isolated student veterans may not have had the opportunity to participate. Furthermore, due to the difficulty of recruiting veterans to discuss sometimes painful experiences without anything in return, we were unable to recruit enough participants to reach theoretical saturation. Nonetheless, these data are rich in details that would otherwise have been unattainable via methods such as standardized survey interviews. Moreover, they suggest a number of concrete policies and practices that should be implemented within higher educational institutions to assist student veterans in successfully navigating the transition from the military to the university.

Policy Implications

First, student services should reach out to student veterans and provide them with practical support such as educating them about university processes, academic advising, and how to secure their educational benefits. Such assistance will help student veterans who are accustomed to more clear-cut rules and guidelines, and might reduce the stigma against help-seeking behaviors among military veterans (Lokken, Pfeffer, McAuley, & Strong, 2009).

Second, colleges and universities should grant course credit for comparable military service and training whenever feasible and appropriate. Not only would this be more efficient for student veterans seeking to become credentialed in the civilian world, but it would also validate student veterans' experiences rather than discount them.

Third, in light of the findings that veterans with combat experience feel especially socially isolated on campus, colleges and universities should create opportunities and spaces in which these student veterans can socialize together. "Exes" of specific roles such as veterans can find comfort in joining together in a community to support one another in their transitions. Such communities may moderate the emotional struggles of transition, help individuals incorporate identities from their previous roles into new ones, as well as cope with any stereotypes or misunderstandings of larger society (Ebaugh, 1988). Given advances in social networking, schools could use virtual spaces to help create a space where student veterans can find other veterans who go to the same school.

Conclusion

Cumulating evidence, including the findings described here, suggests a number of concrete actions that institutions of higher education may take to increase the likelihood that military veterans will transition to college life smoothly and succeed as students. Given an equal opportunity to succeed, student veterans have the potential to make a unique contribution to their university communities by sharing perspectives and experiences about which few others in society are aware.

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