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## Through Army-Colored Glasses: A Layered Account of One Veteran's Experiences in Higher Education

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## Through Army-Colored Glasses: A Layered Account of One Veteran's Experiences in Higher Education

### Abstract

There is a lack of research on military veterans in higher education that captures the issues from an insider's perspective. To that end, I sought to reflect upon my own experiences with higher education as military veteran—from a budding recruit all the way through to now being an administrator and faculty member. I utilized a layered-account autoethnographic approach (Ronai, 1995) to interrogate my multiple perspectives that developed over time on veterans' issues in higher education. I found that the GI Bill—the modern iteration of the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944—was a powerful motivator both in starting my military career and continuing my studies; my thinking on transfer credits from the Joint Service Transcript evolved from seeing them as an entitlement to lacking rigor. I felt out of place as I left the military and attended a traditional university campus, and then I sought out the faculty members who reminded me of the no-nonsense military from which I had departed. My experiences in the military continually guided my behavior as a student and that of other student veterans I observed, thus, I recommend that institutions glean lessons from these experiences to better serve the unique demographic presented by the growing population of student veterans.

### Keywords

Autoethnography, Veterans in Higher Education, GI Bill

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## Through Army-Colored Glasses: A Layered Account of One Veteran's Experiences in Higher Education

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*There is a lack of research on military veterans in higher education that captures the issues from an insider's perspective. To that end, I sought to reflect upon my own experiences with higher education as military veteran—from a budding recruit all the way through to now being an administrator and faculty member. I utilized a layered-account autoethnographic approach (Ronai, 1995) to interrogate my multiple perspectives that developed over time on veterans' issues in higher education. I found that the GI Bill—the modern iteration of the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944—was a powerful motivator both in starting my military career and continuing my studies; my thinking on transfer credits from the Joint Service Transcript evolved from seeing them as an entitlement to lacking rigor. I felt out of place as I left the military and attended a traditional university campus, and then I sought out the faculty members who reminded me of the no-nonsense military from which I had departed. My experiences in the military continually guided my behavior as a student and that of other student veterans I observed, thus, I recommend that institutions glean lessons from these experiences to better serve the unique demographic presented by the growing population of student veterans. Keywords: Autoethnography, Veterans in Higher Education, GI Bill*

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There is an unfortunate gap in the literature on veterans' issues in higher education with little exploration from an insider perspective. To best honor the voice of the student veteran community, I wrote this autoethnography utilizing my own insider experiences in both cultures. Breaking through the barriers of a relatively-insular community, this study provides insight into the conflicted feelings of veterans in higher education and how military ways of thinking perpetuate throughout a veteran's life experiences. Institutions of higher education may then use these experiences to better understand the tension experienced by student veterans and veteran employees as they balance two disparate ways of thinking—the military and higher education.

### Opening Vignette

If higher education was the gateway to a career, then the military was my ticket in. At 16 years old, I had no concept of what I was going to do after high school, but once I turned 17, I just knew that I should join the military. I never planned to make a career out of it, but I had always looked up to my father. He had enlisted during the Vietnam Conflict, serving with the U.S. Army's 5<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group. That was only a brief interlude in his life though, as he left Purdue University to join and then he returned there to his industrial engineering program once he finished his two years of service. The marketing I had seen convinced me that higher education was essential to any future career plans that I had, and the admiration for my father told me that the military was an honorable path. It did not take the recruiter much work to convince me that a four-year enlistment was a good idea with the updated version of the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944, known simply as the GI Bill, as my primary incentive.

I wanted to serve my country, but the wave of patriotism following the attacks of September 11, 2001 would not come for another year. “This,” I convinced myself, “is the best of both worlds.” I would serve my country for a few years, get an honorable discharge, and then ride my free ticket to higher education through the GI Bill.

As the bus from the airport check-in finally arrived at its destination, there was a pit in my stomach. I had no idea what to expect. My world exploded as Drill Sergeants, wearing their odd “round brown” hats, invaded the security of our bus, yelling confusing directions. One thing was clear though—we were to get off the bus with extreme haste. As I took my place in our misaligned formation, I wondered what I had gotten myself into. “I know you all think you’re here for the GI Bill...” were some of the first words I remember there, and they brought an odd sense of comfort from association with his statement. What followed really took me aback. “...but that’s not what you’re here for. You’re property of the U.S. government now. You’re going to learn to kill for your country, to die for it if you have to.” My mind began to wander as I pondered why I really was there. At roughly the same time as my mind tuned back in to what he was saying, the Drill Sergeant made a statement that troubled me for a long time, simply expressing that, “And if you really are just here for the GI Bill, you disgust me.” If I was here to serve my country too, what was so bad about coming for the GI Bill? My opportunity to reflect was cut short by another shark attack, with screaming and running from place to place. The sentiment expressed that day was one that came up over and over throughout my training. It was somehow wrong to want to get something out of military service; it was juxtaposed against the Army value of “Selfless Service.” Throughout all my training, I just felt dirty, a little embarrassed that I was one of those people who had signed up to earn the benefits of the GI Bill.

### **Context of the Study**

As I approached the junior year of high school at my private school, I had thought about going into a private college for my undergraduate education; however, my decision to join the U.S. Army and utilize the GI Bill took me down a very different path. As a low-ranking soldier, I was promised to be able to take classes using tuition assistance, wherein the military would pay for me to take classes. While at an Army base in the Midwest, I enrolled in about nine classes through a community college, but I was forced to drop all but one as unanticipated duties would prevent me from attending. After being reassigned to the Pacific Coast, I took random classes at the base education center as offered by a community college and local university. After I had accumulated about 60 credits, one of the civilian employees at the base education office informed me that I might be close to an associate’s degree, and in fact, I was. Soon after, I graduated with an Associate of Arts degree. In the final nine months of my enlistment, I had a flexible schedule that allowed me to take evening classes on the main campus, where I was majoring in history. I finished my time in the Army with an honorable discharge as a sergeant, and my wife and I moved away from the snow to the Southeast. \ I took a full-time student load toward a history major at the regional public university with classes stacked on certain days, and I worked as a substitute teacher on the other days of the week. Upon graduation, I was hired to teach at a large, public high school, and I began my master’s degree in education to meet the requirements of teacher certification. After finishing that degree, I attended seminary by a combination of intensive, week-long summer courses and online courses. In the final leg of my formal education, I completed my doctoral degree in educational administration with a focus on adult and postsecondary education. I was then the director of distance education and an assistant professor of education at a small, religiously-affiliated university, where I also served as the point of contact for military and veteran students

returning to complete their degrees. I have now transitioned to a full-time assistant professor position in higher education and student affairs at Fort Hays State University.

## **Methodology**

### **Layered-Account Autoethnography**

The significant gap in the literature on veterans in higher education that I sought to address was the lack of voice for student veterans regarding the issues they face. Though veterans are often the research subjects in a higher education setting, there has been little qualitative research devoted to providing their voice, and I was unable to find any written on the topic directly by veterans. Because of this desire to recognize individual voice and allow for direct expression, I utilized autoethnography, a form of narrative inquiry, to tell my own story as a student veteran as situated in the scholarly literature. To that end, I sought to answer the following research questions: As understood by a student veteran, what significant issues were affected by the intersection of his military veteran and student statuses, and how his did perceptions of those issues change over time?

Autoethnography uses narratives to connect the personal with the broader sociological context (Creswell, 2013; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Though autoethnography has often been tied to expressing trauma or oppression (Clough, 2000), it need not be limited to that. One of the key strengths of autoethnography is that it is written directly by someone with insider experience (Ellis & Adams, 2014), and I have unique dual-insider experience, viewing the phenomenon of military and veteran students in higher education from both the perspective of a student and a professional serving those students.

The layered account is a recognized form of autoethnography that interweaves multiple voices and uses research literature as a source of comparison to experience (Ellis et al., 2011). In this piece, I reflected on my changing perceptions of higher education through the lens of my military and veteran experiences. I have utilized several of my own voices as they emerged over time: before joining the military, as a student on active duty, while a student veteran, and finally landing as an administrator and part-time faculty member in higher education. There was some overlap between the last two periods, as I worked in higher education throughout my doctoral program. The layered account approach was pioneered by Carol Rambo Ronai (1995) as she reflected on her childhood abuse that informed her professional life as a sociologist. In it, she used multiple voices to both portray and interpret a text, presenting vignettes set during her abuse, providing reflection from her present voice, and correlating her experiences with relevant literature.

### **Data Collection**

Autoethnography consists of first-person accounts as told by the author. To recall these events, I used systematic sociological introspection as my method to most accurately recount my stories (Ellis, 1991). I attempted to convey the meaning of the stories, both as they unfolded in time and now as I have come full circle in higher education (Bochner, 2013). Though used sparingly, the quotations used are those that stood out the most clearly and have been reconstructed to the best of my memory.

This paper evolved from an idea for a class project to become a thorough reflection of my entire educational and military background. I first began this paper in partial fulfillment of a doctoral research methods course on ethnography and narrative inquiry. Through my own student veteran status, I found most of the research on student veterans tended to be written from a sterile, outsider perspective that did not really understand the culture. As I began to

think about the issues that most affected me as a student veteran, I reviewed the literature, as presented with each topic in the findings of this paper, and I confirmed my preliminary conceptualization that there was little literature which utilized the voice of student veterans. Because I was still a student veteran at the time I began writing this manuscript, the issues significant to me were at the forefront of my mind. To further interrogate my experiences, I reviewed artifacts, such as transcripts, coursework, and correspondence I had written, to prompt my memory and check accuracy.

The first step I took was to look at my Joint Service Transcript (JST) with recommendations of credit for military training, and then I compared that to my undergraduate transcripts. I then reviewed the syllabi and coursework that I had saved from those undergraduate institutions, as well as documents from my military training. I also looked at letters I had written to my parents and wife, as well as notes I had kept. In aggregate, these artifacts helped me recall my experiences and perspectives with clarity.

Even the process of writing this piece caused me to reflect and further reconsider how I view the relationship between military and veteran students with higher education, which is a significant outcome of autoethnographic writing (Ellis & Adams, 2014; Ellis et al., 2011). I hope that this manuscript will help other student veterans to process their experiences and those outside this intersectionality to better understand how this unique group experiences higher education (Hayano, 1979; Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013).

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis in layered-account autoethnography proceeds concurrently with data collection (Ellis et al., 2011). I began my project by outlining the issues that were most significant to me at the intersection of my military veteran and student statuses. I then explored the artifacts related to those major concepts and spent significant time considering my experiences. The breadth of those artifacts and thoughts were then distilled and presented as my own different voices over time as they related to the most significant issues. This polyvocality within one individual over time was utilized by Carol Rambo Ronai (Rambo, 2005; Ronai, 1995) to tell the experiences of her sexual abuse both as she experienced it in her childhood and reflected upon it in her adulthood.

### **Rigor and Trustworthiness**

Autoethnography has been criticized as being a methodology that lacks rigor as a form of musing about one's own personal experiences, but this represents a singular, narrow view of rigor tied to validity (Ellis et al., 2011). While the methodology cannot and does not intend to utilize statistical validity, the rigor of autoethnography is best understood as the production of "analytical, accessible texts" (Holman Jones, as cited by Ellis et al., 2011 para 40) to create a positive impact (Holman Jones, 2005).

### **Summary**

My account unfolded in somewhat similar fashion to Ronai (1995), tracing the developments over time in my thinking about topics pertinent to military and veteran students in higher education. At times, those voices disagree, representing developments in my understanding and psyche. As an active-duty soldier and then student veteran, I thought of the JST as credits I was entitled to through my military training; I later came to consider them as inferior in academic rigor, especially as compared to upper-level undergraduate courses. In

other instances, the differences were much subtler, with multiple layers of narrative over time reflecting and interpreting earlier versions of myself.

In a follow-up piece to the earlier exposition on her abuse, Rambo (2005) used the layered account to paint a picture of her grandmother. This approach is most significant as she drew relations between her impressions of her grandmother and her own identity over time. Within each of the topics I address, I used layered accounts to emphasize chronology. Development over time was key to my account. As in the opening vignette, my perspective on the GI Bill changed over time based on the experiences associated with the military. Whereas I enjoined the U.S. Army and the associated GI Bill for personally utilitarian purposes, I found that this mindset caused my patriotism and worthiness to be questioned, leading to a psychological struggle that unfolded further over many years. The literature review was embedded as a layer in each section to provide context, though research on student veterans and the issues related to them is often minimal.

I took care to protect both the identities of those mentioned and authenticity of the narratives. I used pseudonyms for those mentioned to protect their identities, excluding those inherently identifiable by key familial relationships (Wall, 2016). As a faculty member, the institutions I attended and worked at are a matter of public record; however, I have obscured identifiable details of others to the greatest extent possible.

## Findings

Throughout my experiences, there were several key topics that stood out to me as significant at the intersection of being both a military veteran and student in higher education: the GI Bill, the JST and American Council on Education (ACE) recommended credits for military training, not fitting into the traditional higher education scene, and being drawn to faculty who reminded me of the military atmosphere. Throughout my lifelong learning, my status as a military veteran colors how I see things around me. I will forever operate and think like I was trained, and those ways are often incompatible with the traditions of higher education.

### The GI Bill

The Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944 created a system to provide student aid "for the readjustment in civilian life of returning World War II veterans." Though the functional details have morphed many times, it has best been known as the GI Bill, as an allusion to the "government issued" moniker for members of the American military. The most current version is the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008, or Post-9/11 GI Bill. What was initially contrived during World War II to help returning veterans is now a major enlistment incentive, providing tens of thousands of dollars in tax-free student aid.

**Student veteran: The planned future.** On my way out of the Army, a counselor at the base education office helped me plan ahead. The local university where we were moving was described as the least expensive four-year university in the country at that time. She advised me that, under Chapter 30 of the Montgomery GI Bill, I would be making a lot of money from my benefits.

Upon arrival at the new institution, I soon found that my counselor was right. Though I had to pay the cost up front for each semester, I made a solid part-time wage from the excess paid to me in the benefit, and that was furthered by the tax-free status of those funds. Though I was initially concerned about the financial viability of being a full-time student, that melted away once I did the math of our situation. My wife was teaching high school biology in the local public school district, and I could receive almost the same amount in net income through

the GI Bill and substitute teaching on the days I did not have a class. I almost felt guilty having this level of aid while many of my classmates struggled to pay their bills, but then I would reflect on the years of picking up cigarette butts around base and 12-mile runs in the negative temperatures of early morning Alaskan winters. Quickly, I would remind myself that I had earned this.

One thing that was clear to me was that the GI Bill really was my ticket to a better life—not just for a future career but my life while a student. I could choose to work on days off if I wanted to, but I did not need to. I did not have to get an evening job. I could reasonably do what I wanted because of the financial provision from the GI Bill.

Even today as a doctoral student, I am still utilizing the benefits of the GI Bill. It provides my family with significantly more financial flexibility. For example, the partial housing allowance gave us the ability to afford more gymnastics lessons for my four-year-old daughter that we would not otherwise be able to comfortably pay for at this stage in our careers.

**Higher education professional: Key to the future.** Military Reservists, National Guardsmen, and former and retired military members—I have served as the academic advisor to students from each group, and many have shared that they would not be able to pursue their goals without the benefits of the GI Bill. In the case of one Reservist, he has to work a full-time job to support his family; however, the GI Bill allows him to study online toward his goal of becoming an officer. It provided the path to a career change for one retiree, as the student was able to pursue a graduate program that would have not otherwise been affordable. As the point of contact for veteran students and advisor to most of the veteran students engaged in distance learning at my institution, I see these stories play out over and over. Even a minor paperwork issue with the Veterans' Administration can cause student veterans to have to completely sit out a semester. The debt-free nature of the GI Bill has provided educational pathways for many student veterans that would not have otherwise been open or would have required incurring significant debt.

The GI Bill is also celebrated by most of my advisees who use it, aside from occasional points of frustration with paperwork and misunderstanding complicated details. However, I also work with many students who have no affiliation with the military, and I observe a very different attitude toward them toward federal financial aid. While the Pell Grant does not create debt and most of my students who have it appreciate it, it is not associated with proud memories like those who use the GI Bill. Federal loans, however, are often cast in a very poor light by my students. Some have no desire to take on debt to fund their education. Some are concerned about repayment because of what they hear in the popular media. Very few of my students look favorably on federal student loans. Whereas student veterans using the GI Bill often bring it up as a positive at the start of conversations, students using other forms of aid, especially student loans, often talk about the aid they receive reluctantly and with a measure of trepidation.

**Context.** The GI Bill has been an excellent source of financial aid for student veterans, with the Post-9/11 GI Bill now providing for tuition costs, textbooks, and housing. Though not all encompassing of expenses, it allowed me the flexibility to only work when I desired to do so. Many veterans using the GI Bill do struggle with finances as they juggle studies with employment (Medley et al., 2017). Across the broader population, undergraduate students are increasingly dependent upon working while studying to fund their education (Perna & DuBois, 2012). Between 75% and 85% of undergraduates work while pursuing higher education, averaging 24 hours per week for dependent students and 34.5 hours for independent students (Perna, Asha Cooper, & Li, 2007).

The GI Bill is a major motivation for enlistment in the military (Barr, 2016; Eighmey, 2006). Though the reasons can be various and are often a complex arrangement, other factors, like patriotism, also play a major role (Eighmey, 2006). It was the intersection of these factors,



along with my father's military service, that motivated my own enlistment. The provision of the GI Bill in exchange for four years of service to my country was a win-win in my mind.

Enrollments by veterans have increased at four-year institutions under the Post-9/11 GI Bill (Barr, 2015). Since the introduction of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, the enrollment growth of veterans has exceeded general enrollment growth (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). As these veteran, non-traditional students return to higher education, it is important that institutions are prepared to meet their needs and adjust to this new enrollment demographic.

### **The Joint Service Transcript and Credits for Military Training**

The JST provides a formal record of military training for members of the U.S. Army, Navy, Marines, and Coast Guard, and it includes recommendations for credit by the American Council on Education. Members of the U.S. Air Force receive a transcript from the Community College of the Air Force, and though it is a different document with other challenges, it will not be discussed here, as it is not part of my narrative. Institutions of higher education remain free, however, to accept or reject the credit recommendations on both the JST and Community College of the Air Force transcripts.

**Active-duty soldier: Free college credits.** While I attended a mandatory meeting at my base education office, a counselor suggested that I might be close to completing an associate's degree. I was pretty sure that I was not as close as it sounded, but I listened anyway. She told me that I need to fill out a quick application and then get my "JST." The Army is notorious for its many acronyms, and this one was unfamiliar to me. So, I asked her to explain what it meant. For some reason, part of her response sticks out to me as much as any single quote in my experiences with higher education: "You gotta get this; it's like free credits!" She showed me how to order my JST, and so I had it sent to my university.

They transferred in nine credits, with one credit being deemed as equivalent to "Intro to Personal Computers," one credit counting toward my general education humanities requirement, and the other seven credits meeting elective requirements in physical education, health, humanities, computer science, and counseling. On my transcript, there were not even course names, with "Departmental Elective" being substituted in each. When I first saw them appear on my transcript, a brief thought ran through my mind about getting what you paid for, but it rapidly disappeared behind the pragmatism of being close to my degree. When I graduated with my associate's degree in May 2005, I was happy for that shorter path, which allowed me to walk at commencement next to my wife as she finished her bachelor's degree in biological science.

**Student veteran: A sense of entitlement.** After my move from active duty to civilian life across the country, I became a full-time student. I found the academic realities of transfer quite confusing, and the bachelor's degree appeared to come with far more policies and procedures than my former associate's program. When I arrived at my university in the Southeast, I felt entitled to special treatment. I had convinced myself that, with the aid of military transition counselors and rampant patriotism, I had earned many benefits owed to me by society. Most prominent was the GI Bill, but this attitude permeated all of my thinking. I felt the power of being a consumer, and I surmised that the university needed me more than I needed them.

As I approached graduation, I was informed by the Registrar's Office that, despite having a pristine grade point average, I would not be able to graduate with honors, because I had only completed 38 credits from the university and the honors designation required at least 40 of their credits. I vehemently protested to my advisor, testing the boundaries of how far I could push the issue. He agreed to sponsor me in a two-credit independent study, which allowed

me to meet the requirement and turned out to be the most significant learning experience of my undergraduate coursework.

It was this entitlement mindset, though in a less developed stage, that manifested itself a year before graduation as I attempted to transfer my JST credits. The university transferred all the 100 previous credits that I had been awarded through CLEP, JST, and collegiate work onto their transcript; however, a review of my degree audit showed me that many of those credits simply did not apply to my degree. Twenty of those 100 credits did not meet any requirements. Whereas many of the JST credits had been labeled as “Department Elective” at my associate’s degree university, most of them now seemed wasted. Having experienced many bureaucratic errors while in the Army, I learned to check on my paperwork to make sure I was being taken care of. When I confirmed with the Registrar’s Office that it was not a bookkeeping error, a flash of anger came over me. Memories of the base education counselor telling me they were my free credits and the transition counselors telling me that I had earned them rushed back to my mind. I considered quitting or at least threatening to switch to a different university, though I did not follow through. After many emails and visits to various offices, I arrived back at another lesson I had learned in the Army—sometimes you just lose. The majority of the “free credits” I had “earned” and counted toward my associate’s degree ended up being exactly what I had thought of when I had first heard about them—I got what I paid for.

**Higher education professional: Oversold?** The process of research for this project has caused me to examine all of my old transcripts. For my eight-week training to become a Chaplain Assistant in the Army, the ACE recommended I be awarded five credits. Of those, one upper-division credit was recommended each for ethics, grief counseling, and religion. As a higher education professional, I have come to see upper-division credits as representing the ability to demonstrate higher level thinking skills, often in the forms of analysis and synthesis in the process of research.

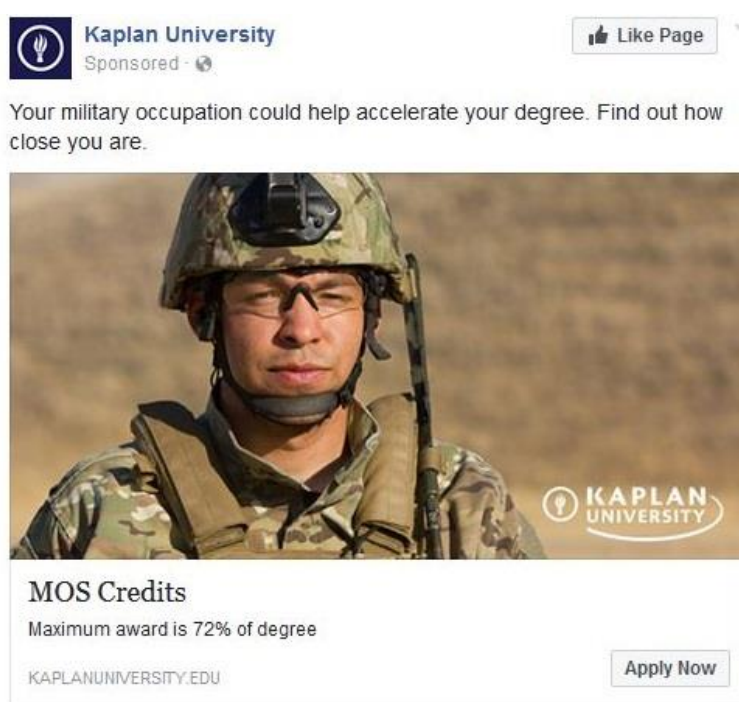
Four years after that training, I took my first upper-division course in the discipline of ethics. Whereas my military training on ethics consisted of memorizing things to do and not to do, this course stretched me to compare ethical systems and consider why things were or were not considered ethical. Comparing the military training that I received upper-division credit for in ethics and then the actual upper-division course in ethics, there was little to nothing in common. The military training was prescriptive, and included information that was memorized, and a small amount of application. We would take short, multiple-choice quizzes and have discussions that were not assessed, but that was the extent of it.

I find it a significant stretch to equate the military training I received in basic training or chaplain assistant training with collegiate-level learning beyond electives in physical education or health, let alone upper-division credit in humanities disciplines. Soon after my course on ethics, I took an upper-level history course. Whereas I had been a top performer in all of my military training, I felt like I hit a wall in this course. Rather than lecture, the professor would spend most of the class period leading discussion our primary source reading, often asking us to compare that content to other things we knew. Despite feeling like I was stupid compared to the other students in every class period, I managed to earn an “A.” Both then and now, that class is the archetype of upper-division rigor in my mind. I was challenged to think beyond rote facts, digging deep into sources and synthesizing them for discussion. The paper required extensive research and the ability to synthesize scholarly articles. Again, my “free credits” could not have been more different. Having now finished reviewing my transcripts, syllabi, and work products from years ago, I feel somewhat as if the JST credits should be moved off of my college transcripts, especially those listed in the upper-division, as they just feel inferior and contrived.

I have seen up to 70 credits transferred in off of a JST for advisees. One afternoon, I was reviewing transfer credits with another staff member at my institution, and he asked me

what I thought of accepting credits for military training based on the ACE recommendations. I thought long and hard about how to respond. I believe there is an aspect of it that is utilitarian and rightly recognizes the training, maturity, and experience garnered by a member of the military. That aligns well with the concept that higher education exists to promote a labor-ready workforce. However, I noted that, “It doesn’t seem to fit well with our liberal arts education here. They just aren’t doing critical thinking in a lot of that military training or really getting academic rigor out of it like they should be for those college credits.” In the course of conversation, I acknowledged that the rigor of collegiate courses, especially in the lower division, can be spotty as well, but ultimately, those issues did not seem to justify accepting work that was not up to academic standards. I later thought to myself, “Should a student be earning upper-division college credits if they cannot do research or communicate what they’ve learned in an academic fashion?” The answer to my own rhetorical question was “no.” Then, I reasoned, why should we be awarding upper-division college credits for military training that does not teach or require those skills to demonstrate deep learning?

As a veteran, I was fed an advertisement in my Facebook news feed by Kaplan University (see Figure 1). The advertisement itself suggested receiving up to 72% of my degree for my military training. After following the link, I was informed that I could use this type of transfer credit for “up to 50% of the credit needed for an associate’s degree in business administration or criminal justice,” but that it was capped at 50 quarter hours for veterans of combat arms jobs and based off documentation on the Joint Service Transcript (Kaplan University, 2017).



The image is a screenshot of a Facebook advertisement. At the top left is the Kaplan University logo, a blue square with a white torch icon, followed by the text "Kaplan University" and "Sponsored" with a small globe icon. To the right is a "Like Page" button with a thumbs-up icon and a dropdown arrow. Below this is the text: "Your military occupation could help accelerate your degree. Find out how close you are." The main visual is a photograph of a soldier in full combat gear, including a helmet and camouflage uniform, looking directly at the camera. In the bottom right corner of the photo is the Kaplan University logo. Below the photo is a white box containing the text "MOS Credits" in bold, "Maximum award is 72% of degree" in a smaller font, and the URL "KAPLANUNIVERSITY.EDU" at the bottom left. On the bottom right of this box is an "Apply Now" button.

Figure 1. Advertisement from my Facebook news feed for Kaplan University.

**Context.** Despite the negative tone expressed here for transferring credit shown on the JST for much military training, especially at the upper-division level, I do see a place for accepting it in higher education. Certainly, the comparative nature of military training to collegiate learning would vary with quality and curriculum. For example, the training given to military medics might cover topics like anatomy very well. From my own experience, I would find that the military leadership training I went through in association with my promotion to sergeant was almost comparable in quality to graduate courses I have taken on leadership,

except for research and writing requirements. However, I would recommend caution to the broad acceptance of areas outside of professional training or fitness and to be especially cautious with credit at the upper-division level. It is a matter of difference, not superiority and inferiority.

Boerner (2013) looked at the role of credit for military experience awarded to veterans, setting in contrast the teaching of theory in college versus the application of theory in military training. She at least tacitly acknowledged there the distinction between the two means of instruction. Another significant factor she proposed was whether students with prior military training would be repeating previous learning or gaining new knowledge in the college courses deemed equivalent.

The ACE (2013) has provided assessment of military training since the 1940s as determined by subject-matter experts who are experienced faculty members from accredited institutions. They describe their award of upper-division credits on this basis: “The courses involve specialization of a theoretical or analytical nature beyond the introductory level. There is more scope and depth of analysis required. Successful performance by students normally requires prior study in the area” (ACE, 2013, p. 2). Comparing that to my own experience, I was awarded upper-division credits for ethics, grief counseling, and religion based on my job training. Reviewing the training materials that I have saved and contemplating my memories, we had little to no theory or analysis in the trainings for which I received upper-division credit. In those areas, we memorized what Army doctrine said, though sometimes we had decision-making flow charts to follow. There was some role playing for application. No prior study was required in any of those areas, though it is possible some of my other trainees coincidentally had done so. I was also awarded two credits for military science and two credits for leadership after attending the course required for my promotion to sergeant. Comparatively, there was a great deal of more depth in that training, as we had previous instruction on leadership from military training and service. Direct instruction was used as a springboard, from which we had to do light research, writing, and presentations with significant application. Though this course far more closely aligned with the above description of upper-division credit, all of these were recommended in the lower-division.

### **In Class: The Island of Misfit Students**

The stereotype of a typical college student is an 18-year old who has academically graduated high school but whose maturity has not quite attained to the same point. Though that portrayal is overgeneralized and not representative of many students, the traditional college student has little in common with a non-traditional student who is also a veteran. Coming from a highly structured environment based on discipline and having experiences that civilians cannot imagine, the military veteran in higher education is often coming with a laser-like focus and deep psychological scars. Despite serving on active duty in the Army, I was never assigned to a unit that deployed into a combat zone. That spared me the physical and psychological trauma experienced by many others in the military, but I did come to higher education with what I perceived as a far higher degree of discipline, focus, and motivation than the vast majority of my classmates who were traditional students. For me, like many other military and veteran students I knew, the traditional college campus was absolutely foreign territory with culture and customs far different from that of the military.

**Active duty soldier: Is this a joke?** Maslow’s Hierarchy. That is the only topic that I can remember from the first college class I enrolled in. I was stationed in the Midwest, and I enrolled in the course through one of the institutions that provided courses inside the base education center. I had to drop the course after the first week. While my unit’s leadership had signed off on the course and thus agreed to ensure I was free for the evening class, they retracted

that agreement quickly. A soldier who I did not know was in my unit had left a cigarette butt outside of the barracks, and so all of the junior enlisted soldiers had to spend the evenings for next week picking up trash around the buildings. This forced me to drop the course, and the same story repeated itself about seven more times, though I lost a firm count. Finally, I was able to complete a geography course in the basement of the base education center. After being forced to drop so many courses, I was ecstatic to finally finish one.

Classes in the base education center at my Pacific Coast duty station were both comfortable and frustrating. It was an odd environment. For example, though there were three or four institutions operating out of the building, there was one history professor. He taught introductory courses in world and American history for each school, and I took all of the survey courses from him but through various institutions. During my first semester there, I took two music history courses at the same time. Those courses would later haunt me, as I ended up having to take comparable courses at my Southeastern university because the slight variation in the name precluded their transfer to meet music requirements. Unfortunately for me, there was no variation in the textbook or listening CDs. To this day, my coworkers make fun of me for humming songs like *De Plus en Plus* by Gilles De Binchois.

Classes on base, however, felt comfortable, surrounded by other soldiers and some military spouses. My wife, who was then a full-time student there, even took one of the music history courses with me. The classes came to my location, and the students were peers. For all the courses on base, I also found myself disappointed. Aside from memorizing those songs, I learned little from the 31 credits I earned in that building with a 4.0 grade point average, and the classes just seemed to be missing something. They did not feel like college. In the middle of that same time period, I took an anthropology course on the main campus as a three-hour block each Saturday morning. The other students were mostly non-traditional, but few were military. I did not, however, really feel comfortable with them. I was nervous at the specter of a real college campus. It was a new place with people unlike me. This was the first college class that really forced me to think. The expectations for my paper were much higher and the level of discourse in the classroom pushed me.

With a new semester, I peered somewhat confusedly around the lab. “Where was the instructor?” I thought to myself. As the evening class period started, I came to the harsh realization that I, at 22 years old, was older than the GA teaching the lab section and every other person in the room. My first class with traditional students on the university’s campus was the lab section of my introductory science course, for which I had taken the lecture portion on base. The instructor would hang around my station and socialize with me while we did the lab activities, something that I perceived to be because we were the only ones who appeared to be over 18 years of age. I was definitely out of place and uncomfortable here. Most frustrating were the other students in my lab team. They would commonly skip our meeting times, leaving me to do extra or even all of the work.

After receiving special permission from my unit, I was able to attend a course during the regular work day. The first hour of my upper-level history course on the main campus was frightening. Rather than blathering through a talk about the syllabus, the professor arranged us in a circle and began discussing how the topic fit into the big narrative of history and within its geographic context. I was never particularly interested in Europe during high school, and I felt like the questions he asked all referenced things we were supposed to have learned in our freshman world history courses and were thus totally foreign to me. Throughout the class, I struggled to fit in. All of the other students knew each other and enjoyed a certain degree of collegiality. They had a common basis of knowledge. I had neither. Though I earned an “A” in the class, I still sometimes wake up at night in a sweat, anticipating being called on there.

**Student veteran: A fish out of water.** On the campus of my Southeastern university at 23 years of age, I usually found myself to be one of the oldest students in the room, though my history courses seemed to attract a few other non-traditional students. Every day that I would drive in to see bed sheets with spray painted messages dangling above clutter from the previous night's party, I shook my head. Going around campus, there were activities everywhere, but none appealed to me. Sometimes if an event had food, I would walk through for that, but I wanted nothing to do with the students or student life on a traditional campus. Though I was only a few years older than the traditional students, I was very different. I had military discipline and a wife, and I lived off campus. Many of the social things that are often central to campus life only further illustrated the distinction between them and me. Whether accurate or not, I perceived the traditional college students as immature and out of control. At times, those students can seem like children when you go back to a traditional campus after life in the military.

Later in graduate school, I came across a meme that best illustrated how I felt on the campus of my Southeastern university. In a scene from the movie *Billy Madison* (Simonds & Davis, 1995), Adam Sandler sat as an adult in a room filled with grade school children with the words "HOW IT FEELS TO USE YOUR GI BILL" superimposed on it. The meme illustrated how those students can seem like children when you go back to a traditional campus after life in the military. In talking with fellow veteran students there, this meme aligned with their perceptions as well.

Perhaps more infuriating than the students and campus life was the ineptitude I perceived in the bureaucracy. Life in the military had linearity. There was a chain of command. Decisions were grounded in clear doctrine. Life on the college campus was not so, as I frequently experienced repetitive mistakes and miscommunication. Wrangling the bureaucracy to get answers was reminiscent of the many layers associated with military command but dissimilar with decentralized decision making. While in the military, my records were lost multiple times by multiple offices, but there was always a clear chain of custody and responsibility. The registrar's office at one of my graduate schools repeatedly lost forms declaring my dissertation committee and program of study, and there was no clear path to resolution.

While at the Southeastern university, I found that I preferred online classes. Though most of my classes had to be face to face, I relished those times I could avoid the clutter and awkward social experience of being on campus. Online coursework allowed me to seriously focus on the content and learning without the associated baggage.

**Context.** Veterans often struggle to fit in on a traditional college campus (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Elliot, 2015; Kirchner, 2015; López, Springer, & Nelson, 2016; Medley et al., 2017; Osborne, 2016; Ryan, Carlstrom, Hughey, & Harris, 2011; Vacchi, 2012). The military profoundly shapes how student veterans look at life on campus (DiRamio et al., 2008), and student veterans often undergo a sort of culture shock during that transition (Vacchi, 2012). Isolation, especially having come from tight-knit teams in the military, can inhibit the student veteran's ability to learn (López et al., 2016). Student veterans often report feeling generally uncomfortable, not fitting in with peers and feeling unfairly judged by their faculty members (Elliot, 2015; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Indeed, faculty members who do not have personal experience with the military may have more difficulty relating to student veterans and display a reduced willingness to help them (Gonzalez & Elliott, 2016). Veterans may perceive traditional students to be immature and disrespectful, which can lead to isolation on campus (Medley et al., 2017; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). The lack of structure in the typical college setting can also be unsettling (Kirchner, 2015). Intentionality in the classroom and around campus is necessary to accommodate the unique needs of this student demographic (Miller, 2015; Osborne, 2016; Ryan et al., 2011). Veterans using the Post-9/11 GI Bill take all of their

undergraduate classes online at a 50% higher rate than non-military students (NCES, 2016). This preferred utilization of online learning aligns with my experience, and the logical extension of that experience and the literature is that this is due, at least in part, to discomfort with the traditional campus environment.

### **Finding a Fit with Faculty Members**

What do I want out of a faculty member? That perspective has changed over time. Though I entered my college experience looking for the hallowed sage, it quickly devolved into wanting either extreme ease or rigor. I began to specifically gravitate to faculty members who had military experience or reminded me of the hardened military instructors of my past.

**Before joining the military: The exalted sage.** While in high school, I believed that college professors were unquestionably transcendent. My private school had drilled respect for those teaching me, but professors were not only respectable but cool. Their sagacity made them somewhat heroic in my mind, and I could hardly wait to engage with those who bore the title of professor.

**Active-duty soldier: Whatever.** Why was a professor named “Staff” seemingly always assigned to the classes I registered for on base, but then I had someone else on the first day? Several years later, I learned that it was just a placeholder while the institution found an adjunct to cover the classes there. I had no idea of what to expect from faculty members in my classes on base; rather, I saw it as my student duty to work with whoever was assigned to teach me. Since the rigor of the freshman and sophomore level courses I was taking on base was generally far below what I had done in high school, I somewhat looked down upon the professors I had. A part of me was thankful for easy credits, but at the same time, I was not satisfied.

The first professor I really respected was in my upper-level history class. He was relatively new to the institution, so he was adjusting to the students there like I was. I perceived that he really knew what he was talking about, and he was the first tenure-track or tenured faculty member that I had ever had. Though not a perfect match, he was the first professor to come close to the exalted sage that I expected before graduating high school.

**Student veteran: This my professor?** “Literature Elective.” This was the single most frustrating aspect of my degree audit at my Southeastern university. I had heard of [ratemyprofessors.com](http://ratemyprofessors.com) from some other students, so I looked up the different professors listed for the general education literature course I needed. Only one area mattered here—“Level of Difficulty.” My experiences in high school English had made me despise literature, so I wanted the easiest way out. The site gave me one part-time faculty member who stood out as the easiest. I deliberately turned in my first assignment for his class having put forth only minimal effort. It was a low-stake task, and I wanted to see what kind of a result that half of my effort would garner. When I saw the 100% mark at the top, I knew that I had picked well. I did the work, but I measured out everything I did to avoid really trying at anything. I left the course with a perfect grade.

During the same semester, I took a history course. Though PowerPoint was already a staple in college classrooms, this professor would bring in an old-fashioned slide projector. However, she really did not know how to work the contraption, so I took the initiative to help her out during the first class. She was a very sweet, elderly woman who reminded me of my grandmother. That first gesture of aid turned into a semester of troubleshooting her attempts to teach with any instructional tools beyond the whiteboard and her own voice. I earned an “A” in that course as well, but again, I did not feel like I learned a lot. Much of the class time was spent fumbling around until I helped to resolve the issue, and the multiple textbooks she

selected were very repetitive in content. It seemed like almost everything I did learn came from the independent research associated with the course paper.

I began to look at the instructors for these two literature and history courses with disdain. Having just exited the Army at the rank of sergeant, I wanted to “smoke”—to assign punitive physical training to the point of exhaustion—them. I came to perceive them as representatives of the vast majority of professors, which led me to characterize the professoriate as unprofessional. The Army Values I had just left were loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage. As a sergeant, it was my job to ensure that I and my soldiers exemplified these values. The professors, I mused, could not hack it. They were an embarrassment to professionalism at varying degrees. Undoubtedly, I was proud and too self-confident, but these two specifically led me to look down upon much of higher education.

In contrast, I adored the faculty members who performed their duties in ways I perceived as professional and who reminded me of the hard-nosed non-commissioned officers (NCOs) I had served under in the military, though I saw them as the exceptions on campus. The two who stood out to me were both professors in my major area, so I tried to take every class that I could from them. One had just retired from the Navy, earned his Ph.D., and then begun teaching while I was there. He taught classes on military history and sitting in class seemed to take me back to the familiarity of my military past. The other professor bordered on the brutal, but I loved to be pushed. He disliked students who took upper-division history courses as electives because they thought it would be easy. He also held the discipline of history in high regard and sought to protect it against those not intellectually strong enough to represent it well. Students were not allowed to enter class late. He was the drill sergeant of professors, and I loved it. I loved seeing the students withdraw after the first major assignment where he would assign actual zeros for grades and write notes to some students suggesting they change majors. In just one of his undergraduate courses, I read over 5,000 pages of scholarly literature and produced an aggregate of more than 120 pages of research writing.

My military background significantly colored my perceptions of professors as a student veteran. Those who reminded me of my military past by exuding professionalism and demanding high performance were heroes. Though most of the other students in their classes feared and/or disliked them, they brought me a sense of nostalgia and familiarity. Those who did not meet that standard, however, were embarrassing like a soldier who could not keep up on a long run. They became silly and frivolous to me, like most of the traditional students and their campus activities.

**Context.** One key to providing quality education on a military base is to consider the differences in military culture and gaining a basic knowledge of military protocols (Vance, Polson, & Persyn, 2014). There is a unique military ethos that permeates classrooms on military installations (Shivers-McNair, 2014). However, the isolation of military bases can work the other direction, with the security and unique culture barricading out the culture of academia. It is important that institutions ensure they are providing both adequate training for faculty teaching there and oversight of the programming to ensure quality.

Despite being oft maligned and having other problems, [ratemyprofessors.com](http://ratemyprofessors.com) does serve as a good predictor for the easiness factor of professors (Coladarci & Kornfield, 2007; Felton, Koper, Mitchell, & Stinson, 2008). I too found it to be a reliable source of information on easiness. Though I did not consult the site when I was looking for rigor or knowledge in courses, it was my go-to source for planning general education and elective courses where all I really wanted was the credit for meeting a requirement.

People may express preference for those who have similar culture and ways of thinking (Na, Choi, & Sul, 2013; Park, Tsai, Chim, Blevins, & Knutson, 2016). As a student veteran, I chose, whenever possible, to take courses from professors who were either military veterans or whose behavior reminded me of military culture. This gravitation, especially when isolated on



campus (Medley et al., 2017), provided a sense of comfort and security. I also found their teaching styles appealed to the way that the military had drilled me to learn.

### **Higher Education Professional: How Military Experience Colors My Perception of Higher Education**

“I think of the president as a major general, executive vice president as a one-star, and then the VPs as colonels,” I told Eddie. He was another veteran employed at the institution. “Oh, you think of everyone in a rank structure too!” he exclaimed as we found something in common. For the next 15 minutes or so, we worked our way through most of the organization, comparing notes on how we perceived specific employee positions as analogous to an Army rank. Wrapping up the discussion, I opined on the challenges with decentralized decision making. “Man, I miss the days when I always knew who was in charge and everyone just did what they were told.” Higher education, unlike the military, rebuffs centralized authority and decision making, but both Eddie and I agreed that it would often make institutions more functional. When I was training for a promotion board, a senior NCO told me, “A strong wrong is better than a weak right.” The implication there was that it was better to make a decision and do the best with it than to spend too much time trying to come up with a perfect answer. It has always been hard for me to reconcile the truth I experienced in that saying and how higher education operates.

Despite their divergences, there are many commonalities between the military and higher education. Higher education loves its pomp and circumstance almost as much as the military. While the military has dress uniforms, academia has regalia, and both use colors to identify areas of specialization. Both struggle to learn and manage complex rules and regulations. Bureaucracies cause paperwork to be lost, and red tape is the norm. When I encounter these points of intersection, my prior military service informs my involvement in higher education. To illustrate, my experiences with lost paperwork in the military have given me a passion for quality in student services to prevent similar points of frustration.

Perhaps nothing affected me more in the military than the memorization of creeds. To understand them is to understand me as a professional. To this day, I have two still mostly memorized: the Soldier’s Creed and the NCO Creed. The following are a selection of the lines that most significantly impact me today.

Several lines from the Soldier’s Creed still govern how I approach my duties in higher education. “I am a warrior and a member of a team.” As a professor and administrator, I seek to become the best individual asset to the institution while also functioning as component of a larger team. “I will always place the mission first.” Both in my times teaching at the primary and secondary levels and now as I teach students majoring in teacher education, I hold this standard high. I often put aside my own wants and needs as a teacher to make sure my students got the best I could give them. I frequently now tell my college students that, “Teaching is hard. You’re going to have to sacrifice and choose to put your students’ education ahead of your own life.”

The NCO Creed is something I think about almost daily. It begins abruptly with the bold statement that, “No one is more professional than I.” As it was to be my goal as a NCO in the Army, I still strive to be the consummate professional. When difficulties come up at the university or I have to make a decision, I remind myself of this. Later, the Creed states that, “Competence is my watchword. My two basic responsibilities will always be uppermost in my mind—accomplishment of my mission and the welfare of my Soldiers.” I seek to always epitomize competence, and when I take any action as a leader, I think about balancing the fulfillment of our job with the welfare of my students or subordinate staff. “All Soldiers are entitled to outstanding leadership; I will provide that leadership.” Often, this line serves as a

pep talk when I leave for work in the morning. This is my goal. "I know my Soldiers and I will always place their needs above my own." This line has prompted me to look for the times when staff morale is low, such as when they are at work around a holiday, to place the needs of others' morale ahead of my own finances or relaxation. "I will communicate consistently with my Soldiers and never leave them uninformed." I try to do this with the staff who work with me, understanding that certain items cannot be shared. It is important for them to know what is going on at the institution and how it impacts them. Ultimately, the NCO Creed informs the details of how I conduct my professional life in higher education more than any other thing.

### **Discussion**

In this autoethnography, I interrogated my experiences at the intersection of military veteran and student statuses. As I considered the topics that were of utmost importance to me, I realized that I had distinct voices over time: a high school student before joining the military, an active-duty soldier taking college classes, a student veteran, and now a higher education professional and military veteran. While the intersectional issues remained static over time, my views on them did not.

### **Limitations**

The experiences of each military veteran vary, and this autoethnography was not written to create a broadly generalizable data set. Rather, I hope that my experiences and perceptions, even as they have evolved over time, provide insight into how those with military experience carry it into every situation they encounter in higher education. My background allowed me to produce this research that expresses a multi-layered insider perspective, giving voice to a veteran in higher education.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

From this research, I make the following recommendations for practice to institutions. First, ensure that the Registrar's Office and faculty leaders are trained on the transfer of military education credits with ACE recommendations. Informed decision making is essential both in making appropriate decisions about transfer and being able to articulate the rationale to transitioning military students who may believe they are entitled to automatic full transfer. Second, provide adequate staffing and funding to veteran's services on campus. Having adequate personnel with the knowledge to answer questions and ease transitions is important for those coming in from a completely different military system and unsure how to proceed. Utilizing G.I. Bill benefits can be challenging and having a readily-accessible and trained point of contact on campus to help can be the difference between enrolling or not. These services also need to include mental health care providers and disability services accommodations to meet the needs of an influx of veteran's suffering from issues such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury. Having active and adequately funded student organizations for military and veteran students may reduce the isolation those students experience. Third, take active steps to recruit military and veteran students, while making sure the campus is engaging in best practices to meet their needs. Military and veteran students bring a unique worldview and set of experiences to college campuses, providing an invaluable contribution to institutional diversity. Utilize an outside evaluator, such as <http://militaryfriendly.com/>, to assess how welcoming your campus is to military and veteran students. Fourth, seek to hire more military veterans to positions within the faculty and staff. They will be best equipped to make the institution friendly to military and veteran students,

and they will be able to serve as intermediaries for veterans new to higher education. Finally, institutions should take proactive steps to recruit and retain veterans as employees, both in the faculty and administrative realms. Military and veteran students may feel out of place on a traditional campus and having those with whom they have this common bond present may help them feel welcome and safe.

### **Recommendations for Research**

Further research is needed on the facets of veterans in higher education that I explored, especially as a new generation of veterans return to the classroom after Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom, and the many other conflicts over the past 16 years. The awarding of college credits for military training, difficulty of military and veteran students acculturating on traditional campuses, and the impact of veteran faculty and staff members on the organizational culture of institutions are specific areas in need of further research.

### **Conclusion**

In this article, I provided an overview of significant issues at the intersection of military veteran and student status through the lens of my own lived experience. This autoethnography then gave voice to one student veteran and illuminated the issues from an insider perspective. The GI Bill has been and continues to be a major motivator why Americans enlist in the military, and it provides a gateway to future success. The JST, or Community College of the Air Force transcript, provides a record of military training correlated to collegiate credits. While it is a popular concept to support student veterans by accepting JST-recommended credits at face value, I urge caution, especially when transferring upper-level credits. Student veterans may also find themselves oddly out of place in higher education, whether in a base education center or traditional campus, as the norms of the military and higher education differ greatly. Veteran students may then be attracted to faculty members who operate in a fashion like their military background. Finally, institutions must remember that the military experience makes an indelible impression on veterans, which will affect how both student veterans and veteran employees operate within the organization. As the numbers of GI Bill-using veterans increase in higher education, institutions should continue to seek ways to make their campuses friendlier to student veterans, such as hiring more military veterans to the faculty and staff. More research needs to be conducted regarding veterans in higher education wherein they are given a voice.

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