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Student Confidence, Success, and Retention: The Impact of Military Experience on the College Lives of Korean Males

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Abstract

This qualitative study was designed to investigate the experiences of Korean male college students within the context of higher education and the military. Twenty Korean male undergraduate students, recently discharged from compulsory military service, participated in this study. The data for the study were collected through semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 70-90 minutes. Data analysis was based on Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory. Findings indicate that these students are more academically motivated as compared to their own freshman year. During their term of military service, they have experienced goal commitment, leadership, and diverse relationships. Upon returning to school, they exhibited a developed set of strengths including a sense of confidence, perseverance, and courage. This attributes significantly contributed to their academic motivation and potentially to their success on campus. For Korean males, it was a challenge to complete their military duty; however, this unique experience gave them strength and helped them to establish their own academic and social lives. This study suggests that specific college experiences that serve to enhance students' self-confidence should be continuously offered to encourage academic motivation in students. Furthermore, this study is significant in that it recognizes successful academic transitions made by Korean male students and documents the potential educational implications of mandatory military experiences.

Keywords

academic motivation, compulsory military service, Korean male college student, student retention

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Student Confidence, Success, and Retention: The Impact of Military Experience on the College Lives of Korean Males

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This qualitative study was designed to investigate the experiences of Korean male college students within the context of higher education and the military. Twenty Korean male undergraduate students, recently discharged from compulsory military service, participated in this study. The data for the study were collected through semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 70-90 minutes. Data analysis was based on Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory. Findings indicate that these students are more academically motivated as compared to their own freshman year. During their term of military service, they have experienced goal commitment, leadership, and diverse relationships. Upon returning to school, they exhibited a developed set of strengths including a sense of confidence, perseverance, and courage. This attributes significantly contributed to their academic motivation and potentially to their success on campus. For Korean males, it was a challenge to complete their military duty; however, this unique experience gave them strength and helped them to establish their own academic and social lives. This study suggests that specific college experiences that serve to enhance students' self-confidence should be continuously offered to encourage academic motivation in students. Furthermore, this study is significant in that it recognizes successful academic transitions made by Korean male students and documents the potential educational implications of mandatory military experiences.

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Introduction

Undergraduate retention and success have become increasingly important to the colleges and universities of today. Since Tinto's (1975) student integration model has become widely recognized, many theories and models have been introduced to develop a better understanding of college retention (e.g., Bean & Metzner, 1985; Braxton & Hirschy, 2005). Today's higher education is becoming increasingly more culturally diverse; many studies of retention have focused upon culturally diverse university campuses and have examined factors (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, age, academic level, etc.) that predict undergraduate student retention (Hendel, 2007; Huie et al., 2014; Kuh et al., 2008; Próspero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007; Soria & Stebeton, 2012; Sun et al., 2016).

In this sense, Korean male college students are a group of students in a different cultural situation as compared to traditional college students. Most male students are required to complete military service while attending college. According to a previous study (Kim, 2016), the commitment of Korean male students in colleges and universities is developed during the first year of college, when they enter military service and return to school. It suggests that their internal transition is more greatly affected by their military experience than by their campus

experience. Korean male students have emerged as a distinctive group in Korean higher education. This group of students gave rise to the “Bok-Hak-Saeng myth.” This stereotype portrays them as highly motivated (Joo & Jeong, 2019; Kim, 2017), having a positive attitude towards everything, and achieving academic success.

Research has been conducted on veteran students’ adjustment to college, including psychological wellbeing, academic performance, and career aspiration (Hong, 2018; Joo & Jeong, 2019; Kato et al., 2016; Nam et al., 2018; Naphan & Elliott, 2015; Noh et al., 2015). However, comparatively little research has been conducted on the effect military service has on the college life of male students. This qualitative study was designed to represent and to examine the experiences of Korean male college students as well as to consider how they develop their personal college experience and nurture their academic success under such unique circumstances. The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of Korean male students within the context of higher education and military service. Knowledge gained from this study serves to support academic affairs professionals who work with college students, especially regarding the design of services and programs for student achievement. This study also contributes to a reconsideration of how to approach college retention and, consequently, expand the scope of educational experiences to support academic success.

Literature Review

College Experiences Affecting Student Retention

Academic achievement is critical to success in student retention (Belloc et al., 2011; Caison, 2005; DeNicco et al., 2015; Hoyt & Winn, 2004; Mamiseishvili, 2012; Soria & Stebeton, 2012; Stickney, 2008). College students who are academically well prepared and more socially engaged and/or integrated are more likely to adjust to campus life and to persist through college (Myoung & Lee, 2015; Próspero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007; Stewart et al., 2015). On the contrary, students with lower academic achievement are more likely to take a leave of absence, transfer, or drop out of their college (Belloc et al., 2011; Sun et al., 2016). Involvement in campus activities improves the academic outcomes of students. Kim and Kim (2015) found in their qualitative study of self-directed learning programs for college retention that academic engagement increased through regular attendance, leading to an increased desire to study. Jamelske (2009) highlighted students who actively participated in first year experience programs cultivated higher academic achievement.

Positive faculty-student relationship affects the educational aspirations of students as well as their academic achievement (Kang et al., 2018; Kim, 2010). College students who interacted with faculty members and actively participated in their education evaluated their college experience as positive, expected satisfactory academic achievement (Kim, 2017), and completed college (Park, 2017). This interaction also helps students to feel more comfortable in their learning environments (Jeong & Park, 2008; Micari & Pazos, 2012; Komorraju et al., 2009; Song & Cho, 2016) and encourages them to actively participate in campus activities, thus, contributing to their success (Kim, 2005). Positive peer relationships foster students’ learning outcomes. Campus activities facilitate interaction with peers and enhance social integration, and ultimately, retention (Collings et al., 2014). A study (n=304) done by Yomtov, Plunkett, Efrat, and Marin (2017) indicated that students who experienced mentoring felt that they were more integrated and/or connected to their college at the end of the first semester than their non-mentored counterparts. Collings et al. (2014) highlighted that peer-mentored students attained higher levels of integration at universities whereas students not mentored by peers considered leaving their school. Connolly (2017) asserted that peer mentoring is also beneficial for students who serve as mentors for personal development including leadership skills.

The psychological sphere strongly affects college retention and success (Han et al., 2017). Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly (2007) stated that individuals who succeed in their field have a characteristic called grit and the concepts of grit (i.e., perseverance of effort, consistency of interest) have been associated with persistence. Grit is found to be a strong predictor of academic achievement and success (Bowman et al., 2015; Clark & Malecki, 2019; Duckworth et al., 2011; Rogalski, 2018). For example, Rogalski's (2018) study found that students with more grit were more likely to complete their classes and obtain higher cumulative GPAs as compared to students with less grit. Bowman et al. (2015) acknowledged that grittier students were more likely to achieve educational success, be satisfied with their college, and feel a greater sense of belonging. Additionally, grittier students became more involved in co-curricular activities and interacted more with faculty members, suggesting that they may have achieved higher levels of education. However, Duckworth et al.'s (2007) recent empirical studies show a negative association between grit and academic outcomes (Bazelais et al., 2016; Buskirk-Cohen & Plants, 2019). Bazelais et al. (2016) examined the impact of grit on academic achievement and success in first-year physics undergraduate students and concluded that grit was not found to be a significant predictor of academic achievement in pre-university Physics courses.

Self-efficacy is associated with educational outcomes (Kang, 2011; Manzano-Sanchez et al., 2018; Tinto, 2017; Torres & Solberg, 2001; Vuong et al., 2010; Zimmerman, 2000). Manzano-Sanchez et al. (2018) found that Latina/o students with higher self-efficacy earned higher grades and experienced greater academic success. Kang (2011) argued that the higher the self-efficacy, the more likely a student was to adjust to his or her major, despite having a lower degree of academic interest. Torres and Solberg (2001) examined college outcomes based upon academic self-efficacy, stress, social integration, and family support. They found that self-efficacy was a critical and direct predictor for academic persistence and other factors, including stress and social integration.

An extensive body of research shows that motivation is associated with educational achievement (Hsieh, 2014; Huie et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2014; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Tasgin & Coskun, 2018). According to Guiffrida, Lynch, Wall, Abel (2013), motivated students (n=2,520) are more likely to obtain higher GPAs as well as to plan to complete college. Academically motivated students complete their own works, giving them a sense of accomplishment and enhanced academic satisfaction, and enabling them to stay consistently motivated without external rewards (Song & Cho, 2016). Academic motivation is closely linked to goals. Morrow and Ackermann (2012) stated in their study (n=156) that students who are more motivated by instrumental goals (e.g., getting a good job) are more likely to want to persist as compared to students who do not have goals or motivations. Martin et al. (2014) highlighted in their qualitative study that, despite poor academic preparation, community college students are successful if they have clear goals and high motivation.

Male Undergraduate Students in the Context of Korean Colleges

Each November, male and female high school seniors take the national college entrance exam — the College Scholastic Ability Test (SAT). Most students enter college after completing high schools. At that time, all able-bodied Korean men between the ages of 18 and 35 are required to serve in the military for approximately two years. Many Korean male students join the military service after the first year of college. Students join the Army, Navy, Marines, Air force, Auxiliary police, or serve as personnel on inactive duty. Soldiers must undertake six to eight weeks of entry training, known as boot camp, and three to four weeks of specialized occupational military training. Upon completion, a soldier is promoted to private.

In general, rank and file soldiers are promoted in the order of private, private first, corporal, and sergeant.

Most students return to college immediately following discharge from military service and identify themselves as student veterans called “Bok-Hak-Saeng.” A recent study (Hong, 2018; Joo & Jeong, 2019; Nam et al., 2018; Noh et al., 2015) conducted on the college experiences of student veterans suggests that they are more academically motivated as compared to their freshman classmates (Joo & Jeong, 2019). However, Noh et al. (2015) argued that apart from achieved academic motivation, student veterans reported struggles in terms of re-adjusting to campus life, including feeling lonely at the beginning of the academic year. Similarly, Nam et al.’s (2018) study concluded that while student veterans were motivated to excel in academic life, they also felt isolated from the campus community.

Researcher’s Background

Cultural diversity has greatly influenced my doctoral study that focuses precisely on the broadened understanding of college students’ cultural experiences. For this study, I have divided them into smaller groups, based on their culture. Then it became feasible to provide customized educational services required by the students. I did not limit my research field to race and ethnicity in higher education; instead, I expanded the fundamental information required to improve higher education services and associated systems by identifying the non-mainstream culture in universities and exploring the experiences of students involved. Currently, I am an assistant professor and director of the Student Success Center at Kyungnam University in Korea. In my work, I have focused on developing educational service models customized for culturally underrepresented students (e.g., student veterans) and analyzing their college experiences to provide them with academic support. As the director and the researcher, I am interested in the “retention of student veterans” who are classified as non-traditional college students. These students are unique in that they face challenges during and after their transition back to school. That is, despite experiencing internal transition (e.g., motivation for studying), they have difficulties negotiating and integrating with college life. It is worth noting here that student veterans have experienced the internal transition necessary for student success. I wonder if their military experiences help their internal transition. The present study sought to examine the military experiences of male undergraduate students and explore how military experiences influenced their college lives. This study is expected to provide academic support to university administrators who foster student success initiatives. Two specific research questions guided this study:

- Q1: How do Korean male college students describe their military service experience?
- Q2: How do Korean male college students perceive their military service experiences in relation to their academic and social lives?

Methods

Research Design

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of Korean male students in the context of higher education and military service. Charmaz’s (2006) constructivist grounded theory was adopted to accomplish the purpose of this study. Constructivist grounded theory assumes that there exist multiple realities, and multiple subjective realities are constructed through mutual interaction and engagement between the researcher and participants (Charmaz,

2009). Basically, grounded theory employs methods that are “visible, comprehensible, and replicable” procedures (Bryant & Charmaz, 2010, p. 33). It is useful for me as a researcher to generate emerging themes conceptually and enhance credibility by applying procedures (e.g., multiple levels of coding) step by step. Grounded theory is also a highly flexible method (Charmaz, 2005). Because data collection and analysis take place at the same time, it allows us to reexamine earlier codes quickly and identify theoretical gaps for developing emerging ideas. This study seeks to elucidate the unique experiences and perspectives of Korean student veterans using constructivist grounded theory procedures.

Participants and Research Setting

Twenty Korean male undergraduate students who were discharged from military service participated in this study. Participants who qualify as full-time student veterans from the institution were invited. Gender was not included as a criterion for selecting participants because only able-bodied Korean men were required to serve in the military. Participants served in army (n=10), navy (n=5), marine (n=1), auxiliary police (n=2), air force (n=1), and as personnel on inactive duty (n=1) after they completed their first year of college. Currently, participants are sophomore (n=7), junior (n=4), senior (n=9), and study at the College of Education, Humanities, Engineering, Electrical Engineering, Computer Science, Business Administration, Architecture, and Social Science. I submitted my proposal to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and adhered to its guidelines. I recruited students on campus at a large, 4-year private university in Gyeongnam Province, Korea. This university has 12,000 students enrolled and hosts various student services, student organizations, and communities. I recruited students via flyers targeting student veterans at the university. I also advertised the study within an online student community and posted study information on the learning management system (LMS) platform. In total, 20 male undergraduate students were interested in being interviewed and I arranged the interviews at a convenient time and place. To ensure privacy and confidentiality, I have used pseudonyms for participants in this study.

Data Collection

I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each participant as the primary data gathering tool. I invited each participant to be interviewed once during the 2018-2019 academic year. All interviews were conducted in Korean. I conducted an interview based on an interview protocol adopted for the research questions. The twenty participants were asked ten open-ended questions during an approximately 70–90-minute session. The interviews were conducted in the researcher’s office on campus. Building rapport with participants was essential for this study. Because most participants did not have previous in-depth individual interview experiences, they felt uncomfortable at the beginning of the interview. To establish rapport, I first offered refreshments and engaged in informal conversation (e.g., personal interests) before the interviews. Then, I checked the informed consent form and provided an explanation of the purpose of the study, including benefits and risks in detail. Finally, the participants and I had signed and dated it. The interview started with warm up questions (e.g., demographic information) and progressed to key questions pertinent to the study. The interview questions focused on male college students’ in-depth experiences during their freshman year and after returning to college from their military service, and the students’ military service experiences as well. All interviews were recorded. Following each interview, I made notes about the participants’ reactions and my initial thoughts. Each participant was compensated with a \$20 convenience store gift card.

Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed by the researcher. After reading the interviews in their entirety, I very carefully reviewed each part of the transcripts and focused my attention on select statements. For the data analysis, I applied two coding processes (initial coding and focused coding) as articulated by Charmaz (2006, 2014). According to Charmaz (2006, 2014), coding summarizes and categorizes each data item by labelling segments. Through this coding, researchers “define what is happening in the data and begin to grapple with what it means” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 46).

Initial coding begins with breaking the data into micro level units of meaning (Charmaz, 2006, 2014). First, I studied the data closely to understand the experience of male college students. I then examined the transcripts line-by-line to identify meaningful units and gave each section a name. Charmaz (2006) suggested that initial coding was descriptive and close to the data. I tried the initial coding to see “what is happening in this data?” I borrow a code name from the data, if necessary. For instance, “*Gun-buff*” is a newly coined word used to express that student veterans themselves have self-confidence or courage when doing something. This word was later fine-tuned as the selective theme of “achieving *Gun-Buffer*,” which includes the three focused codes of “establishing self-confidence,” “developing a successful academic life,” and “experiencing an enriching social life.”

The second coding process, focused coding, finds frequent and significant codes revealed in the earlier data, which are then grouped and synthesized (Charmaz, 2006, 2014). During this coding, I compared similarities and differences or identified causes and effects, and then noted significant categories to identify emerging themes. This process yielded eight primary codes: (1) encountering academic challenges, (2) struggling to connect with people, (3) building self-confidence by taking part in challenges, (4) embracing the complexity of relationships, (5) gaining the necessary insight to achieve career aspiration, (6) establishing self-confidence, (7) developing a successful academic life, and (8) experiencing an enriching social life.

Finally, I devised a process for merging and refining information. For example, I paid attention to the experiences of Korean male students in their freshman year, military service, and when they went back to school. This time, I used the “memo writing” that I created through the two coding processes. Memo writing is a type of theoretical note and connection between the categories of each coding process that elevates this continual process to a conceptual level (Holton, 2010). I compared the notes I made while developing each category and analyzed the variation between them. I discovered that the students’ attitudes toward college life differed before and after their military experience. It was found that first-year college experience had minimal impact on military service success, but military duty had a considerable impact on male students’ college life after returning to school. I understood that the challenges and accomplishments they experienced during their military service were being nurtured along with the competency to improve their lives once they returned to school.

Therefore, three focused codes (e.g., building self-confidence by taking part in challenges, embracing the complexity of relationships, gaining the necessary insight to achieve career aspiration) were classified as “increasing the potential to change their lives” and three focused codes (e.g., establishing self-confidence, developing a successful academic life, experiencing an enriching social life) were categorized as “achieving *Gun-Buffer*.” Then, I proposed that unique experiences outside of the campus (e.g., goal commitment, leadership, cultural diversity) can help students grow. This theory is expected to recognize the importance of university-society networks, and the prospect of expanding higher education.

In conclusion, three aspects of student veterans’ success and retention emerged for the theory development: (1) freshman year: having difficulties adjusting to college life, (2) military

service: increasing the potential to change their lives, and (3) back into school: achieving *Gun-Buff*, being motivated.

- 1) Freshman year: having difficulties adjusting to college life
 - Encountering academic challenges
 - Struggling to connect with people
- 2) Military service: increasing the potential to change their lives
 - Building self-confidence by taking part in challenges
 - Embracing the complexity of relationships
 - Gaining the necessary insight to achieve career aspiration
- 3) Back into school: achieving *Gun-Buff*
 - Establishing self-confidence
 - Developing a successful academic life
 - Experiencing an enriching social life

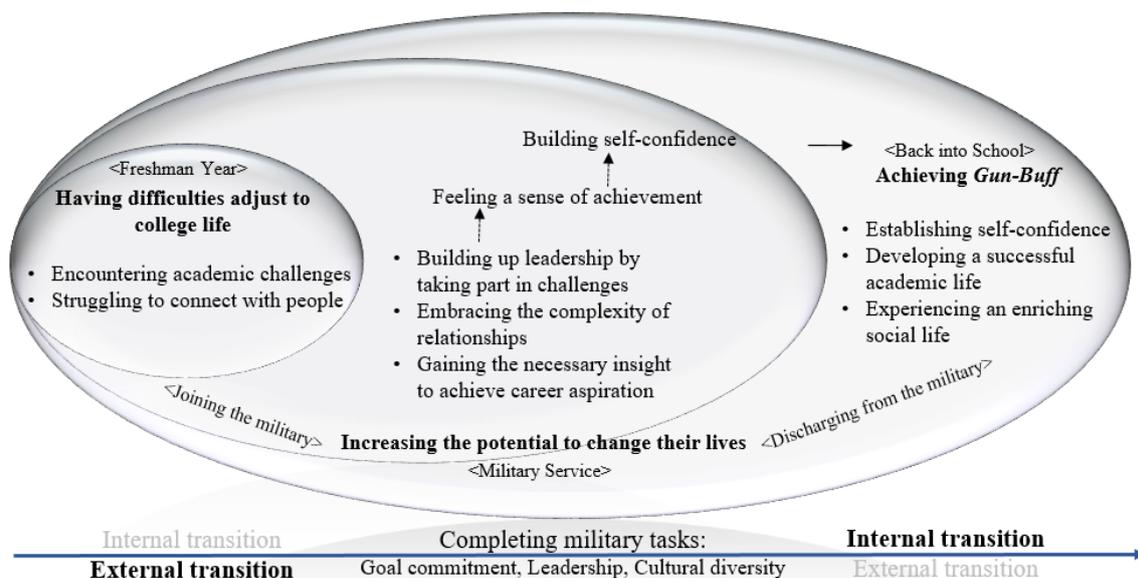
To increase credibility in this study, I used peer review, characterized as having someone familiar with the study, and reviewed the research process and data (Creswell & Miller, 2000). I shared my analysis and findings with researchers who were conducting qualitative studies and offered their feedback. Also, all Korean quotes in this study have been translated into English by a bilingual translator, and then carefully reviewed by both a researcher and a bilingual translator.

Findings

According to the findings presented in this conceptual model (see Figure 1), there are specific experiences that affect college students' internal transition, and these experiences can occur unintentionally in a particular environment (e.g., outside campus).

Figure 2

Theoretical Model: The Impact of Military Experience on the College of Korean Males



In other words, during their military service, Korean male students experienced internal transition as they were exposed to an environment where they could practice goal commitment, exercise leadership, and embrace cultural diversity. Particularly, in such an environment, students developed self-confidence by repeating difficult but feasible challenges and feeling a sense of accomplishment. These unique experiences caused them to transition from traditional college-age students to academically motivated student veterans. The following section contains more information about the stories (e.g., experiences before, during, and after military service).

Freshman Year: Having Difficulties Adjusting to College Life

Encountering Academic Challenges

Many Korean male students' choice of college major is based primarily on career-related factors, including career prospects, recommended by those having significance in their life, such as parents, relatives, or teachers. This economic consideration often leads to a discrepancy between the majors selected and the student's personal background (e.g., academic interests, aptitude, and type of academic programs during high school). In a sense, this then causes them some struggle while adjusting at university. For example, Young-Su studied the liberal arts in high school; however, he had no choice but to take up engineering in college, because his parents insisted, "Man should study engineering in Korea." Consequently, his academic performance dropped in the natural science subjects, including physics and statistics, at the department of engineering. He noted,

For those who were in the science field already know the basics of these courses but it's not the same for the liberal arts majors since we don't even know the meaning of these terms. So even if I thought about trying math/physics provided for the science major, it was just too overwhelming for me. No surprise that I got awful scores.

Similarly, Ji-Su shared:

I majored in liberal arts in high school. When I studied taking physics class I regretted so much. I came to university, paying 4,300,000 won but it seemed like the courses were not worth it and I couldn't understand why I had to take them. It didn't even suit me. I had no idea why I had to take that physics course.

Some students who lose interest in studying and do not keep up with their classes due to a lack of academic readiness appear at risk of dropping out of college. However, they choose to take a break from their studies instead of dropping out—the mandatory military service is one of the options that enables this. Dong-Hu said, "It was really hard to catch up with study. I would apply to my date of enlisting rather than study under compulsion." Young-Su, who too struggled academically in his freshman year, was unsure whether to drop out of college before being promoted sophomore year; so, he hurriedly enlisted. He shared:

In first grade I really wanted to drop out of school. I still continued school since I was concerned about what I would do right away if I were no longer a student. At this rate, it felt like I wouldn't be able to graduate either, so I told my parents. They told me to go as far as I could, but I was planning to stay only until my freshman year. I just wanted to go and do my military service.

Struggling to Connect with People

Most of the incoming Korean freshmen—many of whom go to university without repeating the college entrance exam, come from the same local area, or graduate from regular high school—build their own culture and spend their first year in college together. Then, most male students leave to join the military, while the student veterans return. Because freshmen are more inclined to form their own unity and do campus activities together, some students make an extra effort to not be excluded from this unity. Su-Hong recalled his freshman year when he was a year older than his peers and had already received a notice for his military duty; he spent a lot of time with his male peers to join the dominant group. He echoed:

I felt like I was going to feel sad and lonely when I go to the military alone, right after the first semester ends [...] I just did what other freshmen would do. You know how they call outsiders and *A-ssa* these days? I didn't want to be one of them. I didn't want to be an isolated being that is seen as someone that can't adapt to new environments. So instead of living by my own values, I just did what my friends would do and just followed them.

Some students face difficulties in building relationships with people from backgrounds different than theirs. It does not matter even if they had a few close relationships in high school, although it provided less opportunities for actively making new friends. The college environment requires them to develop new relationships with upperclassmen and underclassmen as well as their peers. The challenge then that these students face is due to their lack of experience in developing diverse plentiful social relationships. Min-Su did not know how to deal with difficult relationships during the freshman year before getting enlisted in the military. Min-Su said:

I wasn't that close or friendly with the upperclassmen when I was a freshman. Since I was the underclassmen, I had to go up to them first and say "How are you doing, nuna? How are you, sir?" but my personality just made it so hard for me to do that and I didn't know what I was supposed to do about it.

Campus activities have been helpful for some freshmen who missed the chance to develop diverse networks for enhancing social interactions outside the classroom. Kyung-Ju was one of those who took advantage of an extracurricular activity the college of education offered. He said:

I think I spent a lot of time alone since everybody would go back to their personal life right after class, even though we were peers taking the same class. Although this extracurricular activity [choir competition] was a kind of mandatory, I personally really enjoyed it since I could meet my colleagues as other people, not just other students in class.

Chan-Min, who had a similar experience on joining a study community, said:

Our study club room is where we spend a lot of time together since that's where we take our classes, put our bags and hangout. It's actually pretty similar to life back in high school. It was helpful to be in a club and have upperclassmen that would help me decide what courses to take and to adjust to college life.

Military Service: Increasing the Potential to Change Their Lives

Building up Leadership by Taking Part in Challenges

Military service requires students to partake in extreme physical training. These young male Koreans had never experienced such physically demanding exercise. Benefits included gaining mental and physical strength as well as improved physical health. Once successfully completing their duty, they received a certificate of completion. Through this experience students gained both physical and mental strength to help guide them throughout their lives. Sung-Jae shared, “After coming back from the military service, I sure felt more confident in doing stuff that required physical actions. I would say ‘pfff... This, I can do’ and was super confident.”

The extreme training gave students an increased awareness of their physical and mental limits. Their sense of accomplishment led to an increase in self-confidence. Kang-Nam thought the training sessions were the hardest time of his life. During those 7 weeks (boot camp), he said he would not be able to get over this and continually explained, “But once we got our badges, I was able to tell myself that there would be nothing in this world that I wouldn’t be able to survive through.” Woo-Seok thought the training session was intense. He had to hike a mountain while carrying his gear, which weighed approximately 120 kg. Required to transport it while holding it over his head and shoulders, he often experienced his skin peeling off. Nevertheless, this experience was a turning point in his life. He said, “I finally accomplish the training which made me feel confidence.”

As students pass each level of physical training, they feel a sense of achievement, motivating them to face the next challenge. Sung-Jae explained:

Our unit ran 10 km every day. It felt amazing to pass an exam as a result of that. Because it felt like a compensation of my hard work and since it made me feel like I was capable of doing such things. Just like that sense of achievement. I was able to feel that.

The military environment encourages students to take on challenges and achieve their goals. Students participated in physical training and experienced a sense of achievement. They strove to learn new things and participated in competitions. Students learn that the key to success lies within themselves. During his service, Chang-Min discovered what he wanted for the first time (e.g., to be a part of the crew on a large navy ship), tried to achieve this goal (e.g., undertaking military exercise), and reached his goal through his own efforts (e.g., became a crew member on the navy ship, Kangkamchan). He explained, “Everything went just the way I planned. For me, nothing has ever worked out as I hoped and wished for, but it finally did, for once. I tried it for the first time, and it was accomplished.”

Students learn that opportunities require their positive efforts to succeed. Yong-Jun wanted to specialize as a computer technician. When the first sergeant assigned him to be a unit supply sergeant and gave the computer technician assignment to someone else, he “straight up told him that I went through advanced individual training and learned this and that, so I would be suitable for the spot.” Young-Jun expressed what he wanted to do for the first time and, thanks to his courage to voice his wishes to the first sergeant, he achieved the position of specialty computer technician.

Students exercise and learn leadership. As a member of the unit, they are required to complete their duty assignment under all circumstances. This experience positively instills soldiers with a sense of responsibility for duty and a sense of pride for accomplishing tasks.

Jae-Min noted, “If I’m ill, another person has to do my assigned duty. On that aspect it feels like a burden but on the other hand, it fulfills me to know that I’m being responsible.”

Teamwork skills are one of the most important elements of military performance. Students have a chance to learn collaborative work in many ways. Jae-Min believed that teamwork was important in the military and that there was nothing individual could do alone there. He noted:

A person who is skilled and smart might not be like that in the military since this is a place where you must show your skills at the right time with the right ability. Even if you really do have it, what you need more are the strength and flexibility to go with the flow and keeping a good balance with others. I was able to learn that during the service.

Students experience leadership as they are promoted to higher ranks. Students with higher ranks (e.g., corporal, sergeant) are required to exercise leadership while students with lower ranks (e.g., private, private first class) are required to complete their duty assignment. Thus, they experience hierarchical roles and responsibilities by rank and learn leadership from the bottom-up. Chang-Min said, “In military, you would normally step the next rank as time goes by. I was able to learn that every rank has their duty to fulfill although they all differed by a little bit. We experienced the big society.” Conversely, “the military has to go on no matter what, so it forces you to take the role of a leaders at some point” (Chang-Min). That helped Chang-Min to “get more self-confidence.”

Some students gain self-confidence through respect from their subordinates. The hierarchical system is not as strict as it once was in the military. Today, if a high-ranking soldier asks his subordinates to do something they often show disgrace. Sang-Hun explained, “In the past it would have been ‘Yes, sir’ but no it’s more like ‘Urgh... Why do I have to do that?’ Then I had to lead them and show them the results. So, there was this submerged respect they had to me.” Sang-Hun entered the military poster contest for a chance to win a reward vacation with his subordinates. As a superior, he led his team and encouraged his subordinates to participate in the contest. His team won the competition, awarding each team member a 2-day vacation. Sang-Hun felt a sense of confidence because he earned the respect of his subordinates without using his authority.

Embracing the Complexity of Relationships

Students often encounter unpleasant relationships with their military comrades. The military environment encourages students to seek a better understanding of people with different backgrounds, experiences, and personalities. Otherwise, the military hierarchical system can be a challenge. Sun-Woo overcame this circumstance by changing his attitude to a positive one. He said, “There were people that just didn’t click with me, but I started changing my attitude toward them and told myself that in order to be a better person, I would have to be able to accept them as well.” Sun-Woo could not accept everyone, but he tried hard during his military service term.

There are some negative aspects of military culture that are subconsciously maintained by rank-and-file soldiers. Under these circumstances, students should work toward developing positive relationships with people in general and especially with superiors. Sometimes it is hard to develop amicable relationships with unfriendly colleagues or seniors; nevertheless, students try to build positive relationships by changing their attitudes. Students cultivate patience by tolerating harassment, verbal assault, and/or nagging from their superiors. Chang-Min said:

For the first two months, I was scolded all the time the moment I woke up to the second I fell asleep... Anyone can say to give up, but everyone doesn't get to do the stuff they want to all the time. I had to endure it. If I wasn't able to, I challenged myself again and again which made me a stronger patient being.

When students are promoted to senior positions (e.g., sergeant) and they put themselves in the shoes of their subordinates, they try to rebuild the military culture. Sun-Woo said, "My seniors would bully me but if I did it to my subordinates it's just the negative cycle going on and never ending. I loathed my seniors but if I did what he had done to me, my subordinates would hate my guts too." Instead of repeating this negative cycle, Sun-Woo tried to compliment and talk to his subordinates in a warm matter. Min-Su also tried to change the military culture when he was promoted to sergeant. He explained, "No matter how busy it is, the higher ranks never hold the oil tank. When I was in that position though, I asked everyone disregarding of their ranks to help them." He believed that this kind of progress helped military people to become closer to one another and to develop relationships that extend beyond military rank.

Gaining the Necessary Insight to Achieve Career Aspirations

A military unit is a place where students can interact day and night with a variety of people and become role models for one another. Sometimes they recognize "people who compliment others as a good person for having skills and a good personality" (Jae-Min) and "people that are respected even though they don't say that they do something well out loud but does it better than others" (Jae-Min). Some military members go to the study room after the daily routine ends, and despite being tired, study until midnight. The people who stayed up late studying were the ones Sun-Woo asked for advice. Sun-Woo said, "I felt like they were different from me, so I wanted to learn. Since I wasn't like them, I wanted to change and be like them a bit more, so I tried to follow what they did."

Students can explore potential career paths through interaction with military members from different backgrounds. Having conversations with their colleagues opened their eyes to the world of different careers available to them and motivated them to change their attitudes toward career aspiration. Jin-Hui noted:

That person told me to study hard and get a lot of certificates. I didn't know anything about it back then, but I was able to realize that there are a lot of certificates and activities I could do. From then on, I slowly found out what I wanted to do and once I got out, I started searching about information related to my career.

Back into School: Achieving Gun-Buffer

Establishing Self-Confidence

One of the most dramatic changes student veterans experiences after completing their military duty is the development of self-confidence. Most student veterans experience *Gun-Buffer*, which means "not being afraid of new challenges." This confidence gives student veterans the fortitude to develop their academic life and encourages them to lead their own lives. Su-Hong noted, "The military offered me to be more confident and independent. So, for me, everything was possible, and I did what I wanted to try out and experienced things I have never did before." Jin-Hui also said regarding his aspirations, "It is a bit concerning but I won't die. Whatever I'll give it a shot."

For Young-Su, courage led to changing his major to English after returning to school. Making this change gave him more self-confidence, prompting him to work towards a double major in Accounting and English. He became unafraid of new challenges regarding academics and became comfortable exploring different career paths. Confidence gained from military experience turned Min-Su into a more positive person. He initiated contact with his friends and asked for information rather than passively acquiring information like during freshman year. He saw himself as a “new person.”

Student veterans believe that their academic success is based upon their own capability and self-confidence. If they believe that their success is dependent upon a university’s rank or reputation, they will not succeed unless they transfer to a top-ranking university. However, if they believe that their success is determined by their own competence, they can succeed in “how they develop their own competences” regardless of where they are. This means that they can control their success of their own accord. Ji-Hun said:

Friends from my university think that going to a well-known famous company in no longer possible. But I think it depends on how hard you work. It’s not the matter of the school. It’s a matter of how much effort you put in. So, I try to work even harder.

Developing a Successful Academic Life

Student veterans tend to engage more in academic life as compared to non-veterans. Once they return to school, they focus on their academic pursuits and earn high GPAs by spending more time studying independently. They experience a sense of achievement and develop self-confidence in their academic performance. After receiving a good grade, Min-Su gained confidence and spent more time studying, saying “I can do this too!”

Sun-Woo changed his attitude in relation to learning, explaining, “As a freshman, I would sit in the back and not focus during class but now even if my friends sit in the back I sit in the front while I focus, write notes and record the lecture. I’m studying hard.” For Chang-Uk, questions arose about knowledge as he became more engaged with his class. He worked to actively resolve these questions, drawing upon the courage and self-confidence he developed while in the military. He voluntarily went to see professors a lot more and said:

During the freshman year, I didn’t ask questions as a newbie. After I came back, however, I had to ask questions to better understand and review what I’ve learned. I was no longer worried about how other people looked at me.

Student veterans also exemplify team leadership when they undertake team projects together in class. They become team leaders and pay close attention to their fellow team members. They accomplish team projects by utilizing leadership rather than sticking to themselves. Gi-Seok worked with others on completing a team project rather than doing only his own part. He said:

I tried hard for our team to communicate and get things done. So, we tried to encourage those that didn’t participate hard to be a part of the project. Since everyone showed effort at the end of the day, our team project grade was great.

Jae-Min helped other team members a good deal in addition to working on his own responsibility on the team project in class. During his freshman year, he did not care about a

project's outcome and only did his part. Now, he communicates with team members and supports them to better accomplish his team project. Jae-Min reflected on that:

As a freshman, students would say "you do this part, I'll do that," and I would swap everything they did and make the final result. Now even if we have our own parts, we try to help each other out a lot. For the final touch, we also gave each other feedback and made it more concise. Now, even a simple project has depth to it.

For student veterans, campus becomes like Treasure Island. Once their self-confidence and courage are combined with the opportunities offered by the university, they are very satisfied with their situation. According to Gi-Seok, "If I were a freshman I would have said 'I'm too lazy. I don't want to do that and wouldn't have done it, but now I think the school's goals and mine match pretty well with each.'" When Dong-Hu was a freshman, he went to his lectures and then went home. He did not know how to utilize the school to its full potential. His military experience helped him to become more active and engaged. He said, "Unlike before when I didn't actively research campus programs, now I'm trying to do so which is a huge change" Chang-Uk also saw endless possibilities in campus life after returning to school. He decided that he wanted to stay at school after discovering the school's value and enriching environment. He said:

University is a place where you can meet so many people from diverse backgrounds and get together. Back then I didn't know that because I was with the people from my major, at the same place, exchanging the same thoughts.

Experiencing an Enriching Social Life

For many student veterans, returning to college is not as easy as they may think. In contrast to their freshman year, when the university offered more assistance, they need to take more responsibility for their academic pursuits. Also, they must take class with non-veteran classmates who tend to be two or three years younger. Student veterans often feel lonely during their first semester upon return, because it is often a challenge to fit in with the non-veteran groups. They tend to socialize less with their junior classmates. Jun-Hee stated:

Once I'm back to school, there are not many people I know left because females that were accepted at the same time as me, are either in their senior year or have already graduated. There's a lot of time and chance to meet freshmen but they're already bonded with each other so it's fearful to try and be a part of them. The fear of "Can I adjust well to their group? Won't I be discriminated?" occurs.

Student veterans provide emotional support for one another. Interaction with peers among student veterans on campus helps them to feel less lonely. Yong-Jun met another student veteran in his department when he returned to college. They arranged their class schedule together except for one subject. Young-Jun explained, "I was with a student veteran friend and then went to class alone, which made me feel like an outsider. When it was time to eat, I was thinking about how I'm supposed to eat without others." To connect with other student veterans after returning to school, some students connected with their peers to re-enter the college together. By having veteran friends when going back to school, they could "register for courses

together” (Yong-Jun), “overcome loneliness” (Jin-Hui), and most of all “eat lunch together” (Dong-Hu).

Some student veterans overcome feelings of loneliness in college by actively participating in campus activities. Jae-Min participated in many college events and introduced himself to non-veteran students during the first semester. He stated, “Participating made me know more people. Through the events I got to know a lot of underclassmen that were two years younger than me and coincidentally I was able to get a lot of help from the class. It also helped me get used to school better.” Jun-Hee was also stressed about forming new relationships after returning to school. He was afraid to eat alone and to take class alone, and afraid of being called *A-ssa* (an outsider). He became a member of student council and took it upon himself to become the assistant director for the council’s management. He was a natural at building relationships with people and established a strong presence as “The back to school leading organizer” rather than “The back to school veteran student Jun-Hee” Chang-Uk participated in a laboratory research project. Returning after military service made him feel like a freshman again. It was much different than being a freshman and he did not get the support he needed. However, he participated in campus activities to work towards a successful a new start. He said, “When I went in the laboratory, I was able to be friendly and close with others and adapt well to school life.”

Discussion

A discussion on the contribution of these findings to knowledge follows analysis of how Korean male undergraduate students with military service experience reintegrated into the campus community and what we, as college and university administrators, should know to apply the research findings to undergraduates in need of academic achievement. This section offers a discussion and implications for practices.

Reintegration Experiences of Korean Male Undergraduates

By focusing on the perceptions and experiences of Korean male college students, this study offers a slightly different perspective on academic motivation and college retention of undergraduate students. In this study, I found that Korean male students who experienced military service are academically motivated to succeed. They returned to school with a set of strengths, including a sense of confidence, perseverance, and courage. These strengths had a significant impact on their academic motivation and likely contributed to their academic success.

Consistent with prior research (Mamiseishvili, 2012; Myoung & Lee, 2015; Próspero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007; Tinto, 1975), a higher level of academic reintegration has a positive impact on Korean male students’ persistence. Student veterans reported that they changed their attitude, in relation to academics and learning (e.g., sitting in the front, recording the lecture, asking questions, studying hard). They participated in campus activities to attain academic experiences and interacted with faculty in their offices for academic advising. These students put more effort into enriching their academic performance and remained at college to accomplish their goals. Students in this study were motivated to stay at their university because of developing their personal competencies and becoming competitive. They realize that, wherever they are, they can control their success of their own accord.

This study makes it clear that social interaction plays an important role for student veterans in re-adjusting to college life. Previous research (Jeong & Park, 2008; Kim, 2010; Komarraju et al. 2009; Park, 2017) also showed that student veterans were more engaged when they interacted with faculty and that their classroom participation promoted a sense of

belonging. Prior research (Collings et al., 2014; Connolly, 2017; Yomtov et al., 2017) makes it clear that peer interaction positively affects the academic life of veteran students. As team leaders they supported younger classmates and, vice versa, to complete their team projects and achieve educational goals together. Mentor experiences in their teams contribute to the personal development of student veterans, a finding like that of Connolly's (2017) study. However, as previous research notes (Hong, 2018; Noh et al., 2015), many student veterans, like freshmen, struggle to fit in at their university due to a sense of isolation. Student veterans in this study reported feeling lonely at the beginning of the academic year, though they actively overcame social isolation unlike in their freshman year. It is necessary for institutions to provide timely counseling and offer services tailored for students' sense of belonging in college.

This study contributes to the literature by offering insight into how psychological factors can play a critical role in understanding student persistence. In this study, male students reported they returned to school with a high academic motivation, largely due to experiences during their military service (i.e., completing harsh training, serving in a unit with diverse people, getting promoted through the ranks). This finding supports the idea (Tinto, 2017) that academic motivation can be strengthened or diminished, meaning it is malleable based upon experiences. Through their military experiences, students have developed certain psychological characteristics and have become highly motivated students determined to achieve academically.

In this study, psychological factors critical to student retention and success are clearly identified (Bowman et al., 2015; Han et al., 2017; Manzano-Sanchez et al., 2018; Rogalski, 2018; Song & Cho, 2016). These psychological characteristics are influenced by external motivation (e.g., "I finally accomplished the training which made me feel confident."), then affected internal motivation (e.g., "I tried what I wanted to try out and experienced things I have never done before."). The most important observation is that student development is enhanced by a broad range of experiences. We can conclude that institutions can work to strengthen these psychological factors in college students by designing a higher quality of services. Clearly, universities need to expand their roles to increase student success and retention.

Implications for Educational Practice of College Students

This study revealed factors that affected academic motivation of Korean male student veterans — goal commitment, leadership, and diverse relationships. Students built self-confidence as they accomplished clear and gradually difficult military tasks. They were motivated to face new challenges by frequently completing difficult tasks and setting attainable goals. Goal commitment improved when students directed their efforts toward their goals, experienced a short period of time to execute them, and received immediate feedback. To increase the commitment of students to their goals, academic personnel need to divide goal setting into achievable steps (e.g., basic, intermediate, and advanced) and guide students by levels. Students will set goals at their own level and move forward to the next step. By repeating these steps, they can feel a sense of accomplishment, resulting in increased academic motivation.

Students developed leadership skills while serving in the military for two years. Military leadership experiences, such as completing military duties by rank, leading teams, and embracing the complexity of relationships, made students active learners and more engaged with their studies. Thus, it seems beneficial for students to experience organizational structure and interaction as well as leadership activities. Opportunities such as on/off-campus internships offer students leadership development experiences. These activities should be offered as early as possible, when considering academic motivation. University programs should involve

apprenticeship and leadership, enabling students to experience in-depth leadership development.

Military experience exposed students to diversity. Students from different backgrounds (e.g., different colleges, regions) but similar situations (e.g., similar aged, no career experiences) forged close ties during their term of military service. They shared ideas and became role models for one another, encouraging personal growth. In other environments, establishing relationships with people from different cultures can be challenging, especially between military members of different ranks. However, students learned to maintain healthy relationships by cultivating patience in the face of harassment, verbal assault, and nagging from their superiors. This study suggests that diversity enables students to learn more about exploring social relationships, including with peers. Academic institutions should recognize the importance of cultural diversity on campuses and develop programs (e.g., local and [inter]national partnerships) for students to be both culturally and socially connected.

This study suggests that college experiences that enhance self-confidence in students should be continuously offered to help students become academically motivated. College and university administrators should improve the quality and accessibility of campus experiences. This study is significant in that it documents the academic transition of Korean male college students, and it outlines the educational implications of mandatory military experiences. It should be noted that this study has some limitations. It did not address cultural differences found in the different military branches but acknowledges a growing awareness that each branch of the military cultivates its own culture. Students may perceive different aspects of military culture in different ways. Thus, further research could explore how the culture of each military branch impacts the experience of students and affects their motivation. In addition, this study did not address the differences in motivational factors between student veterans and non-veteran students. Therefore, further research should address differences in the cultural experiences of these two groups of students.

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