From Combat to Campus: An Invisible and Emerging Student Population

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Introduction

• NPR; 2005
  University of Minnesota; Veterans Transition center
  435 veterans; transition to civilian life and campus

• Background
  World War I
    Soldiers march on Washington
  World War II
    Serviceman Readjustment Act 1944
Vietnam

• “The men who were victimized by even fighting the war were blamed for its outcome” (Figley & Leventman, 1980)

• 2,796,000 served

• Separating the war for the warrior

• “Heroes without honor face the battle at home” (Time, 1979)

Research on Vietnam veterans in college

• University of Iowa; military veterans earn higher GPAs than non-veterans (Joanning, 1975)

• Vietnam veterans did not attain four year degrees at the same rate as did non-veterans (Card, 1983)

• Florida State University study on drug and alcohol abuse and adjustment to college of Vietnam veterans (Horan, 1990)
Lessons from Vietnam

• Stories we heard; Informal interview process
  • Problem of troop rotation and debrief
  • “What is it like to kill another person”
  • Can not relate to the intensity of combat without experiencing it
  • Clashes between student protestors and veterans
  • Vietnam Veterans Against the War
  • Guilt over being safe while others were “out on patrol”
  • Shared brotherhood of campus-based veterans clubs

Vietnam (cont’d)

• Drafted out of college “I did not draft me.”
• Faculty reaction: “I don’t want to hear war stories from Vietnam soldiers”
• Some joined student government or campus programs, including fraternities
• Issue of whether or not to identity oneself as a veteran
• Relearning study habits
• Adjustment issues:
  • Mental health
  • Stress
  • PTSD
  • Abuse
Vietnam (cont’d)

- Transition from combat where life and death and killing are very real issues to “normal college life”
- “Any day you are not being shot at is a good day”
- Vietnam Project at Texas Tech University Web Site www.vietnam.ttu.edu
- How do the experiences of those who fought in the Vietnam War and became students relate to our situations today?

Parallels between Iraq/Afghanistan and Vietnam

- Nature of the conflicts; insurgents embedded within communities
- Road side explosives; booby traps; suicide bombers
- Debate across society about the purpose of the wars; separating the war from the warrior
- Combat veterans as students at campuses largely unprepared to support them
“Multitask”: Follow along with the presentation, while thinking about your campus and the things you, as a leader, could do for combat veterans who are your students.

- Do we have any/many combat veterans who are students; how would I find out? Is that number likely to increase or decrease over time?
- What services, if any, do we provide for veterans; who provides them; are there services that we should provide?
- Are the services we provide adequate to meet the needs of the students; how would we know?
- Who should provide the leadership to develop any program for veterans?
- How can I get interested people together; where does this effort begin; who does it include?

The Study

- Sample: Students who served in Iraq and/or Afghan conflict(s). National Guard and Reserve included. None currently active duty.

- 25 interviews (~12 hrs of recording time)
- Six women and 19 men
- Across three research universities (geographically diverse)
Quick facts about the sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Military Branch</th>
<th>Reasons for joining</th>
<th>Goals</th>
<th>Attended college before</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Army (4)</td>
<td>Money for college (11)</td>
<td>Professional school/degree completion (8)</td>
<td>Yes (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Guard/Reserves (11)</td>
<td>Motivated by 9/11 (15)</td>
<td>To Teach (3)</td>
<td>No (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marines (5)</td>
<td>Family History (3)</td>
<td>Career Military or other Gov. occupation (6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Air Force (3)</td>
<td>Joined out of high school (5)</td>
<td>Health Sciences (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Study

- Qualitative methodology
- Used “Active Interviewing” Technique (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995)
- More than 500 individually-coded segments of transcript data organized into themes.
Software used to code interview data

Findings

Conceptual Framework for understanding Student-Veterans
One morning when I woke up to go school in my senior year of high school, I saw the 9-11 footage. Saw the airplanes go through and that was when I decided, well, I'm gonna go enlist.” [19]

1. Why Join?

• 9-11, Pride
• Educational Benefits
• Economic Reasons
  “That was my motivation (to enlist): Education, I suppose, and a better life for my daughter.” [15]
• Family Ties

“I had to withdraw from all my classes and that was so awful. I had just started classes. (The representative from the military said) “Probably won’t get deployed, so go ahead and start classes, don’t worry about it.’ So I went ahead and started classes and still got deployed.” [09]

2. Getting “Called Up”

• Disruptive (life and school)
• Frustrating
• When next?
• Shorter troop rotations
• Reserves and Guard: Almost like draftees?
3. Combat and other Memorable Events

- It is at times astounding, horrific, or gratifying to realize what some of our students have been through.
- Close calls and tension
- Other cultures, world-view
- Camaraderie

4. Earning Credits

- Student-Veterans look to earn college credits.

I: You mentioned that you didn’t know anything about that (credits).
P: I’ve never heard of that, no. I would be interested, you know.
I: And nobody has told you about it either?
P: No. [18]
1. Exiting active duty

- Participants experienced transition assistance (TAP) differently
- Procedure/voracity differed by branch of service or duty station
- US Dept. of Veterans Affairs role in TAP
- So much information for retirees?
- Register for classes while still overseas

2. Returning Home

- Feeling different / Isolation
  "It’s kind of hard because your family can't understand; and that's the worst part." [12]
- Relationship problems
- Want to go back… contractor opportunities
- Work and school?
3. Local Campus Veteran’s Office

- Focus mainly on financial
- Uneven quality across campuses

“They (local campus office) mainly focused on the financials, in my opinion. I wish there could be something to assist in the transition. I definitely could have used it.” [04]

- Connected better with ex-military
- Need automation or better system

4. Academic Preparation

- First semester back… rough? Get caught up.
- Diminished math and writing skills

“Right now, it’s just getting back on track, staying focused. I came back in December and then I started right back to school in January. That was kind of hard. I don’t think I was as focused as I should have been.” [09]

- Waiting period (adjustment) before enrolling
- Study habits and lack of focus
“Most (students) kind of whine over nothing. They don't really know what it is to have a hard time... They don't have people screaming at them to get things done at three in the morning. They sit in a sheltered dorm room and do homework. It's not too hard. You hear people complaining and you're just like, “why are you complaining?” [14]

1. Connecting with Peers
   - Mature and motivated
   - Impatience
   - Antipathy
   - Other veterans
   - Fraternity

“...I actually don't really like to stand out too much. I'm growing my hair out more... I don't like to give the jarhead appearance, because I am in college here and I want to be a college student.” [04]

2. Blending In
   - Low profile, others may misunderstand
   - Killed anyone? “They always end up asking me whether I killed somebody over there or not. That's a question I don't like people asking me, but, of course, my answer's ‘no.’ And I probably wouldn't tell them if I did.” [13]
   - Pride and ego
   - Quiet in class
“Because of the political sway of the college and most of the students here... sometimes you feel a little unwelcome because of your political views. Most soldiers are conservative... some of the students, especially in political science like to attack the military and whatnot.” [12]

3. Opinions
   - Liberals and conservatives
   - Views on the war (Terrorism, torture, war strategy)
   - Americans not engaged in the war
   - Reluctant to voice opinion

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

4. Faculty
   - Willing to “work” with student-veterans (Guard/Reserve duty, extra help)
   - Connecting with faculty who are ex-military
   - Liberal professors
   - Wishing faculty understood veterans
I: What is it about the ROTC?
P: It’s the military camaraderie, the life set, the sheer motivation. I just always wanted to work harder or give more. [07]

5. ROTC
- Good support for cadets and officers
- Some resentment from those who see action
  “Those guys (campus ROTC staff) are soldiers and are on active duty... (but) we are fighting a war on terror here still and they have a pretty plush job. They could do a little bit to help out the vets.” [03]
- Opportunity to train others / give back

1. Students with Disabilities
- Additional benefits for disabled vets
- Parking and facilities
  “If we have 200 more veterans coming in the next years, how many of those veterans are going to be disabled? We already don’t have enough handicapped parking... So how are we going to handle those people coming back? (Many) of them might have some kind of walking disability that requires a handicapped parking spot. [06]
- Disabilities office

“I got my leg blown off. So, normally I just don’t wear shorts. You can’t even tell. It doesn’t bother me. Very rarely do people say anything about it. No one will mention it unless I bring it up.” [03]
Health

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

2. Anger and Resentment

• Sensing hostility on campus
• “We’ve all got anger issues.” [20]
• Counseling
• Women vets

Health

“I think I suffer from post-traumatic stress, as well as a depressive disorder. It's psychologically crippling... I get so depressed sometimes that I can't function in everyday life. I can't, like, even (perform) the easiest task... because I don't want to leave the house.” [12]

3. PTSD

• Attention span and “focus”

“What made it hard was my attention span and my patience was very short. Sitting in class (for hours) came very hard to do. It was really bad. Some classes I would just walk up to the professor, like during a break, and I would be like: What's the assignment? I would make stuff up just to leave, cuz I was just, I had to do some kind of move, you know?” [17]

• Disability?
1. Personal Finances

- Access: GI Bill not enough?
- Working student
- Motivation to re-enlist

“I reenlisted to keep my benefits... I was hoping to get my school work done in four. But I didn't get it all finished and then had a year and a half overseas, so I had reenlist to get the rest of my benefits” [20]

2. Delayed Benefits Payments

- Federal bureaucracy and red-tape

“Oh, it's horrible. I sent my paperwork a year ago and I'm not even sure if it's coming in yet, to tell you the truth. I checked a month ago and it's still wasn't in.” [01]

- Out-of-pocket

- Campus office helps
3. Multiple Sources

• VA won't pay for remedial courses?

• Learn to work the system

“...and then I am getting the GI Bill also.” [02]

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

Implications for campuses

Financial

• How are student who are veterans informed of educational benefits; who does this; is an officer from the local Veteran’s Administration involved?

• When students are activated and have to leave school, do they receive a tuition and fees reimbursement; how does this happen?

• Are academic advisors aware of educational benefits?

• Do faculty and other campus personnel know how to make referral and to whom referrals are made?
Administrative (Student Affairs / Academic Affairs Collaboration)

• How are veterans identified by the campus; is this information shared across offices?

• Is there a process to protect students who have to leave because they were activated; where is this process initiated; how do students know this?

• Is any effort made to establish connections between the campus and the educational office on local military or guard bases?

• Do we provide an orientation for veterans designed to meet their needs?

Implications for campuses

Administrative (Student Affairs / Academic Affairs Collaboration)

• Does the campus activity recruit veterans?

• Are there academic support services available to assist students who have may need to re-enforce academic skills? How are these services identified?

• Is any information provided to faculty regarding the needs of veterans; how would this information be obtained and shared?
**Implications for campuses**

**Administrative (Student Affairs / Academic Affairs Collaboration)**

- How would we go about sponsoring a student organization for veterans; how do we connect veterans to campus based programs?
- Have we included items for veterans in our student surveys?
- Who from the campus keeps in contact with students who are called into military services; what process is in place to assist veterans who return to the campus following service?
- Women veterans: No substantive difference in stories...

**Mental health services**

- Are we prepared to provide services to students who may be experiencing adjustment, stress, or PTSD issues; do students know how to access those services?
- How can we communicate to veterans that mental health is dealt with differently by colleges than by the military?
- Do faculty and other campus personnel know how to make referrals and to whom referrals are made?
Implications for campuses

Academic advisors

• Are our advisors familiar with the institutional policy on military transcripts?
• Are advisors prepared to assist veterans to withdraw from classes or re-admission to the institution?
• Are the advisors familiar with the requirements of military educational benefits?

Implications for campuses

Disability support services

• (As of February 2007) 55,991 personnel have been injured in Iraq or Afghanistan; what implications does this growing number have for our campus?
• In addition, it is estimated that between 15 and 25% of returning veterans have need for mental health support.
Discussion of “Multitask” Handout

- Do we have any/many combat veterans who are students; how would I find out? Is that number likely to increase or decrease over time?
- What services, if any, do we provide for veterans; who provides them; are there services that we should provide?
- Are the services we provide adequate to meet the needs of the students; how would we know?
- Who should provide the leadership to develop any program for veterans?
- How can I get interested people together; where does this effort begin; who does it include?

Supporting the troops requires more than attaching a sticker to the bumper of your car...

If you would like to be informed when this project is published, leave us a business card and we will follow up in due time; if you have suggestions or insights contact...

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