

I Twenty-five students who served in the Iraq or Afghanistan wars were interviewed. The findings suggest that combat veterans are a student population with special needs and require support from both policymakers and program providers.

Transitions: Combat Veterans as College Students

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The experience of war makes those who fight a special group within the general population. The purpose of our study was to investigate how combat veterans who become college students make the transition to campus life, in order to identify how administrators can acknowledge and support them. A total of six women and nineteen men were interviewed; twenty-four were enrolled full-time at one of three public research universities and one at a four-year regional university (DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell, 2008). Of those interviewed, only two had experienced more than a single deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan. Nine participants had attended college prior to serving on active duty. Students still on active duty were not included in the study, although National Guard and reserve force members were. The authors conducted the interviews, and the decision to end the study at twenty-five cases was guided by researcher agreement that clear themes had emerged (Creswell, 1997).

Emergent Themes

Interviews with participants revealed similar experiences, and themes emerged relating to joining the military, deployment, serving in a war zone, and moving from combat into the classroom.

Joining the Military

One morning when I woke up to go to school in my senior year of high school, I saw the 9/11 footage. Saw the airplanes go through, and that was when I decided, well, I'm gonna go enlist. [Marine reservist]

Motivation to join the service was the result of a combination of factors expressed as “wanting to do my duty,” which included a desire to respond to the September 11 attacks, a sense of patriotism, and a desire to defend or protect the country. Several participants came from military families; one represented the fourth generation in his family to have served, the third to have been in combat. Three made the decision to enter the military while still in grade school. Along with patriotism, the promise of educational benefits was a primary motivator. Eight participants noted the need for financial support to attend college; one wanted the benefits so that she could provide a better life for her daughter. Five noted that the military offers adventure as an enticement and expressed that they wanted something challenging or that the service provided an escape or a change.

Deployment

I had to withdraw from college and, actually, I was doing great at the time. My thing was to try to finish school; I wasn't trying not to go overseas. It was just very upsetting to just have to withdraw in the middle of the semester like that, but I had to. [Army reservist]

Activations can occur during the academic year. One soldier received notice of deployment alert in March, but his activation orders were not received until mid-fall. He lost four semesters because he could not attend while on alert and then served thirteen months in Iraq. A member of the National Guard was deployed to New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina and then to Iraq; both deployments interrupted his education. A National Guard combat medic was activated twice; the first time was for seven months, and the second time included a year in Afghanistan. She had to reapply to a nursing program both times when she returned to college. The military units of two students were sent on back-to-back deployments, meaning that they each missed approximately six semesters.

None of those who had to withdraw indicated difficulty in accomplishing that process, although some noted the difficulty of dealing with college-related administrative tasks while also preparing to deploy, making out a will, and managing the pressure of the situation. There are other consequences of withdrawing from college, not the least of which is financial. A soldier who was deployed withdrew from school and lost a scholarship because he was unable to complete the semester. Others were activated late in the semester and lost the work completed for those terms plus the monies

they had paid to attend. Before withdrawing, most talked with their instructors; one was able to reach an informal agreement with her instructors that she would complete the courses upon her return, which she did. None reported difficulty in dealing with professors in regard to these issues; all reported that their instructors were accommodating to the extent that they could be.

Serving in a War Zone

You are going to come back changed. It's not necessarily good or bad, but you will fundamentally be a different person. [National Guard]

Our intent was not to study in-country experiences; however, we learned of a relationship between those experiences and the transition to college. The experiences of combat do influence other aspects of life, including going to college. The observation reflected in the following comment was something we heard from many others:

“I think it [combat] helped me out a lot and it has given me a lot of self-discipline, establishing goals, time management, and everything. There are so many things you can get from the military to help you out as a college student.” [Regular Army serviceperson]

A member of the National Guard described how being in combat changed her: “I took a lot from it. I made it a learning experience.” For one serviceperson, the lesson was that people in the military do “serious things and that doing serious things becomes good preparation for being a serious college student.” An Air Force veteran described the experience of arriving in Iraq along with all different kinds of people: “You grow up in a heartbeat. You really learn a lot about yourself.” An Army officer who had served three deployments in Iraq and who was medically retired, however, noted that the killing and survival skills learned in the military were not applicable in classroom settings, implying that a relearning of leadership skills was also necessary.

There were constant reminders of the horrors of war. Losing friends who had been killed or injured and evacuated was particularly difficult. A student who had served in an Air Force support unit spoke of the death of a friend he had made who was in the Army as being “very hard for me, because we would meet, . . . have lunch together, and talk. Sometimes, because of work we could not connect. . . . He stopped coming to lunch, and I went to his commander and they told me.”

Some had been wounded. A Marine veteran had had nine surgeries and was retired at 30 percent disability. He spoke of leaving behind “a very close-knit group of guys who I was protecting, watching their butts, [and] they were watching mine. I was forced to leave that involuntarily, and a lot of that had to do with leaving a brotherhood.” A member of the National Guard

whose trucks had been blown up while he was driving lost hearing in one ear as a result. We spoke with a female National Guard member, also a truck driver, who had experienced two trucks blowing up but had escaped without physical injury.

A regular Army enlisted man spoke of his arrival in Iraq. He had just gotten there when a car bomb exploded a mile from the base. He recalled diving to the floor at the sound of the blast. The soldier next to him asked whether it was a mortar; he said, "I don't know; this is my first day." One of the authors wished an Army National Guard veteran a good day as the interview ended. She responded, "Any day you are not being shot at is a good day."

Being in a combat area is stressful; every veteran we interviewed had participated in, witnessed, or heard of horrific events. The women we interviewed had faced the additional factor of being in situations where they were not always welcomed by their fellow soldiers. One woman, a construction engineer in the National Guard, referred to her experience as being in a "double boys club" in which it was difficult to earn acceptance as a female soldier and as a female assigned to construction. A female Air Force tech sergeant and veteran of Bosnia and Iraq spoke of the difficulties of being among only a handful of women stationed on a base with thousands of men and having to learn to navigate complex social and work situations.

Although they had experienced war, none of the participants expressed regret at having been in combat; they were proud of their service, and some, but not all, said they would be willing to return. Some re-enlisted, and among their reasons for doing so was a desire to continue receiving educational benefits so that they could complete a degree program.

From Combat to the Classroom

It would be a great help not to be just thrown into college. All the paperwork and whatnot I have to go through, they could offer a little more help as far as that and other veteran's programs. I'm probably eligible for things I'm not aware of. And I have nobody here to go and talk to [to] find out about [them]. I'd like to see them actually have a Veteran's Department here. Because when I walked in, they just tossed a piece of paper at me and said, "Oh, here, fill this out." That does not help. [Regular Army serviceperson]

The focus of our study was the transition that combat veterans make when they become college students. For many with whom we spoke, this was the most difficult transition of all. Problems, when they arose, came from several sources. The Veterans Administration, which handles educational and medical benefits, is not an easy bureaucracy to understand, although some negotiated it well. We learned, too, that not all campuses have functioning programs in place to assist veterans who have become students. Then there were the challenges of fitting in, of just being a student.

At the end of deployments, the military provides debriefing opportunities as part of the activities of processing out of the combat zone. It was apparent from our interviews that these sessions vary in quality and effectiveness. A National Guard member spoke of “tons” of debriefing sessions in Iraq, Kuwait, and then stateside. He noted that for most, “80 percent did not apply. . . . You get in the habit of tuning it out since there is so much that does not apply.” A member of the National Guard who had been debriefed after he returned to the United States said that the sessions consisted mainly of “how are you doing” questions. A guardsman suggested that he could have gotten better treatment, but to do so would have risked a delay in going home: “They kind of implied to us that if you have problems, you’re going to stay longer; nobody wanted to stay longer.”

Study participants noted several areas that were of concern during their transition to college:

Veterans Administration. The upcoming role of the Veterans Administration (VA) in the post-deployment lives of soldiers was outlined during their debriefings, sessions that apparently did not hold the attention of those who had just left combat zones and who very much wanted to get home. Many of those with whom we spoke described problems with the VA, problems that have received national attention. Some of those problems concerned the payment of educational benefits. An Air Force veteran complained, “It took eight or more weeks to receive benefits.” In the meantime, he had to come up with out-of-pocket funds for tuition and related college costs. His complaint was echoed by others.

Members of the National Guard likely fared better than other servicepersons because each National Guard unit has an educational officer who can help sort out benefit issues. One example of this disparity involves transcripts of military training from the Army/American Council on Education Registry Transcript System. We spoke with several veterans who did not know that such a record existed, how a copy of the transcript could be obtained, or whether their college offered credit for military training. Generally, National Guard members had this information.

Campus veterans services offices and other campus support services. Campuses usually have a designated person to administer benefit programs for veterans. Several of the veterans in our interviews expressed appreciation for the support provided by veterans services personnel on their campus. On one of the campuses represented in our study, students had established close working relationships with staff in the veterans services office, who provided connections for students beyond the processing of educational benefits. In one of the other two situations, the program director was newly appointed and received mixed reviews. On the third campus, the veterans services office received only criticisms; veterans from that campus were unaware of any services available to them through the office.

We heard about an exceptional level of service provided by a veterans services office from a veteran who had transferred from another campus to

one that was included in our survey. When his unit was deployed, staff from the veterans services office handled the withdrawals from classes, dealt with financial aid issues, and kept in contact with the soldiers while they were deployed by e-mailing campus news updates. When the deployment was over, the office staff initiated re-entry and benefits paperwork and assisted with registration for classes.

The students we spoke with mentioned “veteran-friendly campuses,” and while that term was difficult to define, we came to understand that veterans used it to refer to campuses where programs and people were in place to assist with the transitions between college and the military (see Chapters Five, Six, and Eight). These campuses, like the one noted earlier, have made an active commitment to the success of veterans as students. An example of a campus that was not veteran-friendly illustrates the other extreme. A member of a National Guard unit, while in Iraq, made phone contact with the financial aid office at his home campus. He had withdrawn from classes when he was deployed, leaving behind a financial aid problem. He called the office, only to be told that to resolve the issue he had to come to the office, something that was not possible. He hung up in frustration, unable to convince the staff member in the financial aid office that there had to be a second option. By way of contrast, an Army reservist who had had two tours in Iraq said that the veterans services provider on his campus anticipated issues and offered suggestions and solutions even before the soldier realized there was a concern.

Re-entering civilian life and becoming a student. Even for those who had attended college prior to being deployed, there was an adjustment upon their return. A major aspect of the adjustment was relearning study skills. An Army reservist described it this way: “It’s kind of like I forgot how I studied. Prior to leaving, I had a 3.4 GPA, and when I got back, it just went down.” After having been away from school and formal classroom instruction, re-entry was difficult. Several students mentioned the need for an orientation to college programs just for veterans.

While some adjustment issues could be attributed to being away from school for an extended period of time, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was also a factor. A member of the Army Reserves commented, “I think I was a better student when I came back . . . but what made it hard was my attention span and my patience were very short, so sitting in class . . . became very hard to do.” A member of the regular Army said this about adjusting: “Once I got back to school, it was like I know what I need to do and it is right in front of me, but I’m just not doing it. I don’t know if it [is] because I am not as focused as I was before I left, or . . . I don’t know.”

This same person mentioned that when he returned from a year of driving supply trucks between Kuwait and Iraq, he could not sleep at night. Several of the veterans talked about anger and stress as a carryover from their time in combat. The memories of war, of being on constant alert, and of being afraid remained close to the surface and were, for some, difficult to manage. An Army veteran said that he disliked being in large groups of peo-

ple, that he was no longer a very social person, and that he always looked mean. An Army reservist who had spent thirteen months in combat talked about having to keep busy because if he was not busy, he would become depressed. He had not had those symptoms prior to being deployed. A sergeant in the National Guard reported that after more than a year in Iraq, “even my girlfriend noticed the changes. . . . Pretty much everyone that I went over with, I mean, we’ve all got anger issues now, like it kind of falls down as time goes on, but, man, it just doesn’t take much to get sparked off and go . . . ”

An Army officer who spent a year in Iraq talked about the adjustment after coming home: “It is really hard adjusting, coming back from a war zone into the United States. . . . It seemed like for a whole month, I did just a whole bunch of jigsaw puzzles just to clear my mind and keep myself, I don’t know, just to settle myself down and kinda adjust back to life. I’ve got hundreds of puzzles that I did during just that one month, so I guess that was just my way of coping.” Several of those with whom we spoke mentioned having to develop similar coping strategies after leaving combat. A soldier who drove supply trucks in Iraq said she sold her SUV when she got home because she was afraid she would drive it like it was a truck and she was back in Iraq. Another veteran of two tours in Iraq mentioned that he could no longer sit for extended periods of time and that he had to explain his need to get up and walk around the classroom to his professors.

With only a few exceptions, the veterans in our study did not report conflicts with others over the fact that they had served. Still, unfortunate incidents happened. In one, a sociology professor “referred to the American soldier as a terrorist” in a class in which a combat veteran was a student. In protest, the veteran did not complete the final exam and failed the course. In another incident, a Marine who served in Afghanistan was called a traitor in class by another student because he expressed opposition to the war. Generally, the veterans in our sample did not bring attention to their service and discussed it in class only when they deemed it appropriate. Some have been thanked for their service; some have been asked questions about what it was like to be in combat; and at least three reported that they had been asked whether they had killed anyone, a question each found disturbing and difficult to respond to. Several remained in the reserves and wore their uniforms on campus as they came and went from military-related activities. None reported negative incidents associated with wearing the uniform.

Not surprisingly, participants offered suggestions about what campuses could do to assist veterans in their transition to college. Almost every participant spoke about efforts to identify veterans on campus and about being dependent for support on others who have had similar experiences. A Marine who had served in Iraq explained, “People who I would consider my best friends here still can not relate to me on certain levels as far as the experiences I’ve had. You just can’t relate unless you have been there. Those people have. Those relationships are still very strong and very important.”

Many students in our study expressed concerns about friends who were still deployed and about how the sacrifices required by a nation at war do not fall equally on all persons.

Study participants described the structured life of the military and how difficult it was to move from a strictly defined structure to a loosely configured campus where there was no chain of command from which to get answers. A four-year Air Force veteran said that going from “something that is so structured and so routine, and on task . . . then just to be released and you have to make your own schedule, some people find that hard.” His suggestion, which we also heard from others, was that campuses offer orientation sessions for veterans by veterans.

Discussion and Conclusions

My campus has vastly improved their services for soldiers and veterans since the time I first started attending college in 2001. They lay it out for you and show you the different steps that need to be taken to get the benefits that we have been promised. One thing that has been a struggle is that you have to be proactive. [National Guard]

As of March 2007, just over 1.5 million members of the armed services had been deployed and had served in either Iraq or Afghanistan (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2007). As these conflicts continue, the number of combat veterans who become college students will likely increase. Given what we have learned about assisting the members of special needs student populations to achieve their educational goals, it would be a disservice to treat veterans as if they were invisible.

Veterans represent a potential campus resource. They have had leadership experiences and confronted difficult challenges, challenges that have matured and, perhaps, hardened them. Many joined the military to earn educational benefits so that they could realize the opportunities available through higher education. Our work was an effort to learn about the transitions that combat veterans make when they enroll as students. What we learned from the participants in this study suggests that combat veterans who become students represent a population with special needs and that there are ways for campus personnel to work with these students to effectively meet those needs. The following principles provide some guidelines.

- Deployments represent disruptive, life-altering transitions (Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman, 1995). Colleges should develop student-centered activation and deployment policies that manage the campus bureaucracy so as not to further complicate what is already a stressful situation for those called to active military duty.
- Students who are deployed benefit when their campus maintains a connection with them.

- Veterans who enroll as students experience difficulties. Thought needs to be given to the responsibilities assigned by the campus to the veterans services officer. Campuses meet the needs of other special student populations through offices whose mission is to provide specifically designed support services. In planning those services, efforts should be made to know the students who constitute the veteran population (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt, 2005).
- Campuses are encouraged to meet the challenge of becoming veteran-friendly by putting in place personnel, policies, resources, and programs that reflect sensitivity to and understanding of the needs of veterans. Supporting the troops should be an action plan, not just a happy slogan.
- There is an urgent need to share best practices, to exchange ideas, and to conduct research that will provide campuses with the information needed to promote the academic achievement of veterans who are students.

In addition, it is important to note that although gender issues were not part of our study, we heard from female veterans that they faced unique and difficult challenges because of their gender and the male-dominated traditions of the military. Evidence supports the reality of these concerns (Corbett, 2007; Cohen, 2006). These issues are so significant, in part because of the likelihood of negative post-trauma psychological effects on victims, that sexual trauma has become a recognized problem in the treatment of veterans (Street and Stafford, 2007). Campuses must be prepared to provide support to those who have had to deal with sexual harassment and assault by other military personnel while confronting the dangers of combat (see Chapter Four).

Similarly, while mental health issues were not a focus of our study, several of the veterans we interviewed indicated that they were attempting to cope with depression, with PTSD, and with other mental health issues stemming from their service. Approximately 20 percent of service personnel returning from Iraq report mental health problems (Hoge, Auchterlonie, and Milliken, 2006); some studies put the figure of returning veterans who have received mental health or psychosocial diagnoses at over 30 percent (Seal and others, 2007), and data cited by the Department of Defense Task Force on Mental Health (2007) suggest that 27 percent of returning veterans report significant depression, 24 percent report alcohol abuse issues, and 43 percent report problems with anger. Research suggests that deployments of longer than six months and multiple deployments contribute to an increase in mental health issues (Department of Defense Mental Health Advisory Team, 2007). Campuses need to be prepared to meet the needs of veterans who would benefit from mental health support services. In addition, four of the veterans we interviewed had combat-related physical injuries that required accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (see Chapter Nine).

It is likely that as the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts continue, so will the demand for specialized support services for veterans on campus.

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