# From War Zones to Classrooms: Student-Veterans' Perspectives on Transition

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*Student-veterans are a unique subculture across the nation's college and university campuses, and their enrollment numbers are expected to grow to almost two million in the upcoming years following the Iraq and Afghanistan wars (ACE, 2008). It is vital for higher education institutions to critically examine the way they serve this important subgroup and redesign their organizational structures and established cultures to better serve this population. This article examines the perspectives of three student-veterans, provides recommendations on improving their transition into higher education, and recognizes some current best practices that support student-veterans.*

Empowered by the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008, or the "Post-9/11 GI-Bill," a strengthened Americans with Disabilities Amendments Act of 2008, and an economic recession, many veterans returned to the nation's colleges and universities to attain an education. Among these student-veterans are an increasing number of wounded warriors—service members who have one or more disability from their active duty abroad.

Student-veterans are considered to be non-traditional college students. They are usually between the ages of 25 and 34; most likely married, and potentially have at least one child (Strickley, 2009). Because of this, it is difficult for student-veterans to attend college full-time with familial commitments in addition to medical concerns.

Out of the 1.8 to 2.1 million troops, it is estimated that 712,800 to 840,000 veterans may apply for disability benefits upon their return to the United States (as cited in Church, 2009). Since most were involved in high stress combat situations, several physical or mental disabilities plague this new generation of student-veterans. Three major forms of injuries or trauma experienced by those returning from the Global War on Terror are physical impairments, operational stress and mental health injuries, and Traumatic Brain Injuries or TBI (Church, 2009). The psychological and cognitive mindsets of a regimented mode of thinking, reacting, and responding to situations also takes reconditioning by student-veterans and their friends and families upon their return. These conditions, in addition to

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the readjustment phase from combat zones to a civilian lifestyle, can make the transition into the classroom a difficult experience for student-veterans. Therefore, it is critical that college and university personnel across the nation, especially student affairs administrators, "act immediately to develop programs that more effectively promote access and success for this underrepresented group" (ACE, 2008, p. 1), and ensure their smooth transition into the higher education arena.

## Literature Review

Three major themes emerged from the literature reviewed in this paper. The first theme is the common medical and psychological health issues of student-veterans across the nation, focusing on their adjustment to higher education. The second theme examines combat stress reactions with particular attention to the interactions between a returning veteran and his or her family and friends. It indicates that the readjustment process may be even more challenging within the immediate support group for the student-veteran, which can cause increased challenges for adjusting to campus life. The third and final theme examines administrative obstacles and improper institutional decorum student-veterans face when they enroll in colleges and universities and the types of structural and social barriers that may make the transition experience difficult or persuade the student-veteran to withdraw altogether.

### *Medical and Psychological Health Issues*

Physical injuries from blasts, Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBI), and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are three major and prominent injuries that plague returning soldiers from the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars. The common injury from these military operations is from interactions with blasts. Particularly for student-veterans, these injuries can lead to manifestations of sensory impairments: difficulty hearing lectures, discussion or advising sessions, etc.; difficulty seeing the board, reading course materials, and creating written assignments (Church, 2009). TBI can moderately or severely alter the normal operation of brain activities and thus change the functionality of student-veterans. Some of the functional impairments TBI may cause "cognitive problems such as judgment, attention, and concentration; perceptual problems such as hearing, vision, and balance; and physical problems such as motor skills, endurance, and fatigue" (Church, 2009, p. 46).

Perhaps the most important and commonly-known issue facing student-veterans is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In association with the PTSD event(s), the individual may have experienced an extreme emotion such as anger, fear of death, shock, or horror. With those feelings, emotions, and experiences come triggers, or key elements that remind the individual of the event or events. Thus, an action or situation that resembles the student-veteran's experience of being in a war zone triggers a response and action that would be appropriate

in a combat situation. These incongruent actions may reoccur, prompting the student-veteran to behave in a way that is normal in combat, but may or may not be appropriate in their civilian environment.

## *Combat Stress Reactions*

In a collaborative effort, the national Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (NCPTSD) and the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) authored *"Returning from the War Zone: A Guide for Families of Military Members"* so veterans could cope and navigate through the readjustment period when returning home after being discharged. The publication outlines information about combat stress reactions, soldiers' experiences in the war zone, expectations about returning home, and the effects on family life.

Combat stress reactions are organized into behavioral, physical, and emotional reactions that a returning veteran can exhibit during their readjustment to a civilian lifestyle. Common behavioral reactions include "trouble concentrating, being on guard and always alert and avoiding people or having anxiety around large groups" (NCPTSD, 2010, p. 3). Typical physical reactions include "trouble sleeping and being overly tired, upset stomach and trouble eating, and too much drinking, smoking, or drug use" (NCPTSD, 2010, p. 3). Ordinary emotional reactions comprise "feeling nervous, helpless, or fearful; experiencing shock, being numb, and unable to feel happy; and not trusting others, being over controlling, and having lots of conflicts" (NCPTSD, 2010, p. 3). Above all, the NCPTSD and the DVA noted several times throughout their publication that none of the reactions or issues related to war-time exposure are the result of an inherent weakness on the part of the veteran. These are common experiences that have been documented in veterans' examinations upon their return to the United States.

## *Administrative Obstacles and Institutional Decorum*

Student-veterans can be confronted by a sense of culture shock when they first enroll at colleges or universities. Information from a focus group in May and October 2009 in *Military Veterans at Universities: A Case of Culture Clash* (Glasser, Powers, & Zywiak, 2009) accentuated four key barriers that student-veterans experienced while attending college.

The first problem is that some higher education administrators lack the knowledge of the Post-9/11 GI Bill. The student-veterans' "benefits were often received after tuition was due, and they felt stressed by the pressure that this put on them to advance tuition funds" (Glasser et al., 2009, p. 33). The next problem is the self-monitoring perception student-veterans had to maintain while they were in classrooms. "Some [student-veterans] have to modify their speech around other students and they remind themselves not to curse in their everyday conversations" (Glasser et al., 2009, p. 33). The third issue pinpoints the disrespectful behaviors or lack of decorum of the students in the classroom, specifically those of traditional undergraduate students. This includes text messaging, talking to classmates

while the professor is lecturing, and complaining about assignments or about private issues (Glasser et al., 2009). Students might also ask the student-veterans inappropriate questions such as, "How many people have you killed?" or, "What types of missions have you gone on?" (Glasser et al., 2009). The fourth issue, also related to institutional decorum, that student-veterans encounter deals with political views expressed by professors as either opinion or fact that go against American values or the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Student-veterans "found that other students accepted the professors' views regarding U.S. policy in toto and it took a lot of courage to challenge them" (Glasser et al., 2009, p. 33). It is important that administrators, faculty, and staff be respectful in how they present their political views and opinions through their lectures and pedagogies.

## Interview Methods

The following recommendations are based on the interviews of three student-veterans. Each interviewee served in Operation Iraqi Freedom for at least one tour of duty. All three are considered non-traditional students based on their age, marital status, and number of dependents. Two of the student-veterans are enrolled in full-time undergraduate coursework at a large flagship institution in the Southeast, and one recently graduated with an undergraduate degree from that institution. Interviews were scheduled through e-mail, and each student-veteran was able to decide on a location of the interviews: one selected a coffeehouse, another met in an office, and the last was done via telephone.

Each interview session lasted from 45 to 60 minutes. Interviewees were given 25 open-ended questions at least one week ahead of the interview. With respect to privacy and national security, the interviewees were informed that they could choose whether or not to answer any of the questions. They were also offered the option to be known by pseudonyms instead of using their real names; the article will utilize pseudonyms for confidentiality. Question topics probed the student-veterans' past goals and aspirations, major motivations for enlisting, their experiences on active duty, and their readjustment when they returned to the United States.

## Interview Analyses

### *"Ashley"*

The first interviewee was "Ashley," a veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom which advanced to Baghdad and secured the city to ready it for liberation. She is married and a full-time undergraduate student. As a member of the United States Army, she served one tour of duty in Iraq (Baghdad) between 2004 and 2005, returned for six months and was stationed in Washington, redeployed to Iraq (Mosul) between 2005 and 2006, and then returned to Washington. She is currently a resident of South Carolina and moved to the state when her husband was stationed at Fort Jackson.

She described her family as a close-knit group of hardworking, middle-class, and loving individuals. Some of her main motivations for joining the military were: her husband, because he himself was a returning veteran; college, because she knew that she would have education benefits when she returned; and patriotism in serving her country. Initially, she expressed some concerns about joining the military because she withdrew from high school and did not satisfy the educational requirement to enlist. However, she received her GED and passed the entrance battery of tests to enlist in the army. She also expressed struggles with letting go of the civilian lifestyle.

While in Iraq, her emotions ranged from excitement to nervousness. She said that her mode of operation was to get into the area, do what she had to do, and get back to America as soon as possible. She was assigned to set up logistics for encampments and ensure that supply lines and communications were available for the troops. One moment that she will never forget was being involved in an improvised explosive device (IED) explosion while on convey in the city. She remembered just praying to God and hoping the advancing forces turned back, which they did. Sources of comfort were the perspective that troops were a family and that other people "had her back."

Ashley was grateful to have the experience of serving in a war because it made her modify her world view and appreciate what it truly means to be an American citizen. She also described her transition to civilian life as difficult. Ashley felt uncomfortable around large groups of unfamiliar people, suffered restless nights with erratic sleep schedules, and had a hard time relating to others with her recent experience. With respect to higher education, she chose her institution because she considered it to be the best school in the state. She felt disconnected with campus culture because she had real world experiences and believed herself to be at a higher level of development than the current students by mentioning "how funny the students' interactions were with authority figures and how awful they behaved while in class" (Ashley, personal communication, 2010).

### *"Paul"*

The second interviewee was "Paul," a veteran of the 2003 Iraqi Invasion and a member of one of the first military units to reach Baghdad. He is a full-time undergraduate student, a transfer student from a technical college, and the father of two children. He was stationed at Ft. Hood, TX; Ft. Raleigh, KS; Ft. Jackson, SC; Germany; Kuwait; and other locations that he could not disclose. Though Paul's family features a rich military history—both his father and grandfather are veterans—his mother was against his enlisting. However, his family involvement in the military, in concert with his admiration for the military culture and decorum, inspired Paul to enlist.

Paul had a smooth transition into becoming a soldier. He became more aggressive and adopted the attitude of a warrior, and believed it was easier because he grew up in such a disciplined family environment. When he arrived in Iraq, Paul felt "scared as hell." At night, he would hear mortar rounds in the background, watch cruise missiles soar over his head, and frequently hear sirens that alerted him

to impending danger. One event he will never forget was an IED explosion that jettisoned him from an unarmored Humvee. His positive experience, however, was interacting with the Iraqi youth. He remembered how happy the youth were seeing the American military liberate their country.

Before Paul returned to the United States, he had a stop in Kuwait where the locals treated the military like celebrities. The troops went to the beach and malls, ate real food instead of Meals Ready to Eat (MREs), and had the opportunity to feel comfortable rather than on guard. He distinctly remembered what it was like to consume real orange juice, bacon, and eggs while in Kuwait. However, he had a hard time adjusting to life back at home. He said how uncomfortable it was to hear nothing; he mentioned how hearing gun shots or mortars meant that someone was alert and protecting their location. Back home, he often felt an unnerving silence. He spoke about driving in the middle of the roads because he was trained to avoid IEDs, and he continues to have disruptive sleep patterns because of the readjustment period.

Paul made a promise to his mother that he would attend college, so going to the university was a priority. He originally wanted to become a high school teacher, but he decided that he wanted to teach at the two-year technical schools in the state. He recounted that the transition to higher education was hard; he had to sit with his back to the walls in classrooms, felt no relationship with the students because they were "immature," and resented some professors for their anti-American and anti-war rhetoric during instructional sessions. Paul believes that the "greatest organization in the world is the United States military, and nothing else can compare."

### *"Kyle"*

The final interviewee was "Kyle," a veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom where he worked at Camp Doha in Kuwait and Camp Victory in a former presidential palace in Baghdad. He is currently pursuing a master's degree in international studies. He grew up in a typical middle class family, and his parents did not have college degrees. He thought he would become an ophthalmologist, but his parents were shocked to learn that he wanted to join the military. He was motivated by not feeling ready for college life at that time, a chance to have college paid for when he returned from duty, and a sense of patriotism shortly after September 11, 2001. Kyle faced several struggles including the culture shock of military life and the practice of not questioning authority when it came to his assignments and tasks. While he enjoyed the physical aspect of the military, he was not sure what to expect or what he was getting himself into when he enlisted.

Kyle described feeling downright nervous when he began his journey to his combat post in the war because he had no idea what life in Iraq would be like. He spoke about going in with the mentality of being prepared for the worst and always being on guard. One memory that will never escape him is of walking on reconnaissance and seeing a store he just exited being bombed by launched rockets. Letters from home as well as watching bootlegged American movies sold in Iraqi stores kept Kyle mentally strong while on active duty. He spoke about how

important camaraderie and a scheduled work routine kept his mind off of the monotonous experience.

Kyle still identifies himself as consciously making the transition to civilian life. He still has a tactical mindset where he is always looking around and watching out for the enemy. He cannot relate to his friends because it is difficult for him to recount the events that occurred while in Iraq. He has a hard time being around large groups of people and is unable to relate to the general student body. His motivations for going back to school were to finish his degree, earn a suitable job, and maintain a modest living.

## Linking Theme to Theory

The central theme throughout the student-veterans' experiences was that of transition. For this situation, it is best to apply Schlossberg's Transition Theory when working with and understanding student-veterans. Four factors that influence one's ability to cope with a transition are: situation, self, support, and strategies (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). These four critical elements of the theory may help student affairs professionals better understand where to meet student-veterans on their terms and to better equip them with the tools for success in the readjustment period.

The *situation factors* are specific to the individual's perception of certain aspects. The "trigger" element for them was their reintegration into the civilian culture after serving overseas. Timing can be determined by the individuals and their readiness to return to a normal, civilian life. Each student-veteran interviewed believed that they had control over this transition; both Ashley and Paul sought the help of psychologists to help them adjust to a civilian life. However, all three student-veterans were optimistic that the duration of their transition is coming to an end. They all seemed to possess an internal locus of control and viewed that they are responsible for their recovery.

The next factor focuses on the *self*. "Factors considered important in relation to the self are classified into personal and demographic characteristics and psychological resources" (Evans et al., 2010, p. 217). For all three student-veterans, the desire to attain degrees of higher education to improve their social status and intellectual stimulation motivated them to deal with the college transitional period amidst their readjustment to civilian life. With respect to psychological resources, Ashley and Paul showed high levels of commitment to earn degrees by making promises to return to college. Kyle showed both optimism and strong self-efficacy regarding his ability to finish his undergraduate degree and continue to earn a graduate degree.

The next component of transition focuses on *support*, which is divided into four types: intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, and institutions and communities (Evans et al., 2010). There are multiple levels of stress can include, but are not limited to, household demands, coursework, balancing work-related demands, and having time for rehabilitating themselves. Ashley had the support of her husband, who could relate to her because of his past military experience.

Paul came from a military family where several members were involved in various military campaigns. Friends were a major support system for Kyle who received many letters and magazines from those who sent him mail while he was in Iraq.

The last factor of Schlossberg's Transition Theory is *strategies*, which consists of three categories: modify the situation, control meaning, or manage stress in the aftermath (Evans et al., 2010). All three student-veterans exemplify the "manage stress in the aftermath" category because they are readjusting their behaviors and actions to socially reintegrate into civilian life. These categories are accompanied by four coping modes: information seeking, direct action, inhibition of action, and intrapsychic behavior (Evans et al., 2010). All four modes are using the coping technique of direct action. Each of the participants has taken action to improve his or her abilities to function normally in the higher education environment. By doing so, they have actively shaped their paths to achieving college degrees.

In addition to Schlossberg's Transition Theory, it is important to mention Schlossberg's concepts of mattering and marginality (1989). According to these theoretical constructs, students who experience marginality are less apt to become involved in the campus culture. Feeling disengaged, these students may experience a diminished sense of belonging, which could result in not feeling accepted, not viewing academics as a priority, or may even consider leaving an institution. Students who feel that they matter experience a sense of belonging to an institution and acceptance by their peers.

For the case of student-veterans, it is critical that they feel that sense of acceptance when they enroll at an institution. The ease of information and constant communication between the student-veteran and the institution can be the key in ensuring student-veterans' academic and personal success. With Schlossberg's concepts of mattering and marginality in mind, the recommendations below focus on infusing the idea of mattering into student-veterans. The recommendations also focus on how higher education institutions can ease the transition and promote a seamless adjustment from the war zone and into the classroom.

## Recommendations

Burnett and Segoria (2009) are clear in their message to institutions of higher education: "Optimizing the success of students who have functional limitations transitioning from the military is an institutional responsibility" (p. 54). Since the American Council on Education (2008) estimated that over two million veterans will be eligible to enroll in postsecondary education as troops return from Afghanistan and Iraq in coming years, it is imperative that colleges and universities focus on the services they provide student-veterans and on how they can improve their transition into civilian life as well as the higher education lifestyle. A recent release from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) at Indiana University stated that "student-veterans attending four-year colleges and universities… generally perceive lower levels of campus support than nonveterans, and they also interact less often with faculty members" (NSSE, 2010, para. 1).

Promoting interactions among other student-veterans, with faculty and staff, and with the greater institution community must be a high priority in redesigning the environment to better serve student-veterans.

### *Customized Orientation*

The first recommendation is to have a student-veteran component or group within orientation programs for those who enroll as first-time college students or returning/transferring students. This opportunity would allow student-veterans to meet others like themselves who are attending the same institution. Since they would not be bundled into the general orientation sessions with traditional students, more attention could be focused on making sure student veterans not only comprehend the information but also know specific contacts in offices to meet their specific concerns. Bringing these campus partners together to provide student-veteran orientation will allow the staff to network with these students, humanize their work, and show that they do care for the student-veterans.

The University of Texas at Arlington provides a separate orientation designed specifically for returning veterans from active duty during their New Maverick Orientation program. Free of charge to those who register, their veteran orientation sessions aims to better the veterans' transition by connecting them to current veterans, explaining the G.I. Bill and their benefits, and connect them to the resources and services UTA offers (UTA, 2011). The Community College of Aurora in Colorado also provides a similar session in orientation specifically for student veterans. A unique characteristic the veteran orientation program at CCA is that all students, prospective and current, are able to register for the session and it was demanded by student veterans, their families, and many active duty personnel that attend the college (CCA, 2010).

### *Student-Veteran Handbook*

A second recommendation is that student-veterans be given a specialized handbook with on- and off-campus resources for their personal benefit. The on-campus portion of the handbook could list specific people within academic and student affairs departments whom they could contact. Preferably, these contacts should be able to relate to student-veterans (perhaps have some military experience), or they should be knowledgeable about federal and state legislation pertaining to student-veterans. By specifying these contacts could help student-veterans feel reassured that their concerns would be heard and addressed in a professional manner. As for off-campus partners, their information should be provided in case the college or university does not have all the resources that student-veterans can utilize in the surrounding area. According to Vance & Miller's (2009) survey of university or college staff who provide services to student-veterans, "over 70% of referred services are located with 50 miles of the institutions" (p. 21), making critical the relationship between institution and the

greater community. Keeping information updated and readily available to student-veterans is beneficial.

The Florida State University provides a handbook through the Office of the Registrar's website. Compiled by the Veterans Affairs Coordinator at FSU, the handbook gives a breakdown of the benefit programs and their requirements, information for monthly verification for specified veterans, supplemental educational resources, a frequently asked questions section and more (FSU, 2010). Tidewater Community College in Norfolk, Virginia is another institution that has a student-veterans' handbook. Published by the Office of Veterans Affairs, the handbook provides detailed information about the application process, standards of progress, information about debt avoidance, and general information about the college (TCC, 2011).

### *Student-Veteran Seminar*

A third recommendation is to provide a new student seminar specifically for student-veterans. Branker (2009) stated that high expectations are important at the college level and that student affairs professionals should expect the same high performance from student-veterans as they do from non-veteran students. The student-veterans interviewed commented on their desire for a class where they could meet other veterans and learn more about the university. In addition to college information, this class could serve as a safe place where they can share their experiences of college life. The class could be taught by an instructor who has a military background and can establish support and rapport with the student-veterans. Through this class, student-veterans should be able to earn higher grades, decrease attrition due to having no support structure, and increase their chances for degree attainment.

At the University of California at Berkeley, student-veterans have the option to register for two seminars that are geared toward their success at Berkeley and beyond the classroom upon graduation. They offer "Veterans in Higher Education," which aims to allow student-veterans to become acclimated to the university environment as well as "Starting Point Mentorships," which allows student-veterans who have attended Berkeley for at least one semester to serve as mentors to new student-veterans (UC-Berkeley, 2010). Monroe Community College in Rochester, New York has just unveiled their New College Orientation for Veterans course for the spring 2011 semester. Its goal is to develop the skills necessary for academic and personal success as well as bringing representatives from the Veterans Outreach Center and the Veterans Administration to give periodic updates that affect their student-veteran population (MCC, 2011).

### *Institutional Committee on Student-Veterans*

A fourth recommendation is to establish institutional committees to address the needs of student-veterans on campus. It would be beneficial to have buy-in

from the administration to implement changes to campus culture, and committed faculty and staff members could work on addressing student-veterans' concerns. For this to occur, one must open dialogue between the faculty and staff and the student-veterans. Such dialogue could produce roundtable discussions on training faculty and staff about approaching sensitive matters like expressing views of America and the wars. In addition to training, faculty and staff could redesign the way they present their pedagogies to allow student-veterans to absorb information and translate it into learning inside the classroom (Branker, 2009). The committees could also establish a peer mentoring group exclusively for student-veterans to be mentored by other student-veterans, as well as a safe space (such as an office or lounge space with study areas and computers) where veterans could relax or network during their time on campus.

The University of California at Los Angeles has designed a Veterans Resource Team that is comprised of 11 members from the across the UCLA campus with representation from the Academic Advancement Program, Career Center, the Veterans Resource Center, Counseling and Psychological Services, and more (UCLA, 2011). This type of cross-departmental cooperation serves a "one-stop shop" for student-veterans who might be in need of multiple services during their tenure. The University of Nevada at Las Vegas also has a similar committee called the Student Veterans & Military Family Services Committee which provides support services to family members of student-veterans (UNLV, 2011).

### *Recognize Student-Veterans*

Finally, the last recommendation is to celebrate the contributions our student-veterans have made for the country on our campuses across the nation. The interviewees expressed that they would like to be part of a celebration of their service if the institution would sponsor such an event. The college community show their support and appreciation for student-veterans through campus-wide programming that would allow for discussions on how to better serve our student-veterans, how we can support and relate to them, and most importantly, hear their stories.

Northern Illinois University held various events for the week of Veteran's Day in 2009. Roundtable discussions were held in various classrooms about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and invited student-veterans to share their experiences to increase the non-veteran students' understanding (NIU, 2009). Texas A&M University also held events on their campus sponsored by the Corps of Cadets to commemorate Veterans Day. One ceremony was held at the World War I Monument at the West Memorial and a second was at the Corps Plaza Memorial, both included wreath-laying ceremonies and the playing of *Taps* (TAMU, 2010). Texas A&M also added 66 names of Aggies who have given their lives on active duty since the Corps Plaza Memorial was originally cast with 326 Aggies who have given their lives since the end of World War II (TAMU, 2010).

## Limitations of the Study

One limitation of this qualitative study was that the interviews targeted a small sample size which included three individuals in one geographical area. Future studies should expand the generizability of these results through like a larger sample and examining regional differences within the student-veterans population.

Future investigations on this topic will encourage campuses across the country to continue to have these kinds of conversations and address the concerns of our student-veterans.

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