



The Veteran Student Experience and the Academic Librarian



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ABSTRACT

With the increase of student veteran enrollment under the Post 9/11 Veterans Education Assistance Act of 2008, colleges and university campuses are beginning to accommodate the needs of this population. Student veterans present unique challenges to institutions of higher education as they are adjusting to a new culture and coping with both visible and invisible injuries. Some of these war-related injuries affect behavior in both classroom and extracurricular settings and some result in learning disabilities. Librarians who understand the experiences of student veterans can better assist these students with their academic goals.

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INTRODUCTION

Colleges and universities in the United States are seeing a large increase in the number of veterans who are enrolling under the Post 9/11 Veterans Education Assistance Act of 2008, more commonly referred to as the Post 9/11 GI Bill. Within the first year of the Post 9/11 GI Bill over 300,000 service men and women enrolled in college. The 2013 fiscal year saw 754,229 veterans enrolled in institutions of higher education, an increase of 107,927 over the previous year (Dept. of Veterans Affairs). Because of the generosity of the new bill, institutions of higher education can expect increasing numbers of the over two million veterans who have served in the Afghanistan and Iraqi conflicts to arrive on college campuses (Barry, Whiteman, & Wadsworth, 2014). As members of the academic community, librarians need to be aware of the challenges of veteran students in order to support the students in the library and in the classroom.

Though there is a rapid increase in the number of student veterans there has not been a corresponding increase in the understanding of the issues of this group of students as compared to other subgroups such as athletes, nontraditional students, gay and lesbian students, or those in fraternities and sororities (Barry et al., 2014). In her master's thesis Anderson (2012) points out that the research which has been conducted about the current generation of veteran students does not include the "veteran's social and institutional biography and the qualities of higher education institutions that most impact their transition experience" (p. 8). A search of the literature indicates that there are current publications in the disciplines of psychology, disability and higher education that describe how the results of military culture and combat

history affect the assimilation and learning of the returning soldier. There are also some articles in the library literature which are focused primarily on resources for veterans, programming in libraries, and some good suggestions for how to engage veteran students (Helton, 2010; Evans, 2012; Sojdehei, 2013). With the increasing population of student veterans on college campuses it is essential that the academic community, including librarians, be prepared to serve the veteran population. This paper will describe the experiences of the veteran students synthesized from research in education, disability services and psychology and suggest accommodations that librarians can make to support the transition from a military to academic environment and to facilitate student learning. It is worth noting that any programming or adjustments to instruction to accommodate student veterans will have the likely advantage of benefiting all students.

THE WAR EXPERIENCE

Many of the veteran students are returning from active duty in combat, frequently with a history of multiple deployments. As a result of the unique culture of the military and the consequences of experiencing combat, they present on our college campuses with issues unlike those of most other students. Academic institutions must prepare to address the issues of veteran students both in and out of the classroom (Shea & Fishback, 2012). The war on terror, unlike previous conflicts, is "a different kind of war" (Lafferty, Alford, Davis, & O'Connor, 2008) creating a different set of circumstances and a unique set of adjustments to civilian life for today's veteran. There are three distinctions that affect reintegration for the veteran returning from Iraq or Afghanistan as compared to those returning from prior wars: the tour of duty length and pattern, the danger level, and disengagement from civilian culture (Manderscheid, 2007, as cited in Lafferty, Alford, Davis, & O'Connor,

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2008). Lafferty et al. (2008) add two more: uncertainty of duration and the types of casualties brought on by the war on terror.

Historically combatants were deployed for a twelve month period and were reasonably assured that they would only be deployed one time. Deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan, however, can extend to two years and many are deployed more than once. The pattern is unpredictable. The war itself differs from previous conflicts in that there are no safe zones and even those who are not in an area of combat are at risk of attack from snipers or of detonating a hidden improvised explosive device (IED). There is an additional stressor brought on by the uncertainty of how long the conflict itself is likely to continue. It feels to some as if it is never ending (Lafferty et al., 2008).

Additionally, the war has required the deployment of a large number of National Guard and Reserve forces who do not have the same intensity of experience as active duty soldiers nor do they have the same support when they return from duty. Finally, with the improvements in armor and battlefield medicine, soldiers who would likely have not survived in previous wars are now surviving with physical and psychological injuries in numbers that exceed those of previous conflicts (Lafferty et al., 2008; Church, 2009). The veteran students who enter the college classrooms and libraries bring both visible and invisible injuries with them. For this reason college administration and faculty need to evaluate the needs of these students and make changes to support student success.

THE STUDENT VETERAN

Education in general is demonstratively important in the Army and other armed services where new recruits initially attend school in basic training. They then continue to attend several professional development schools during enlistment for promotion and training for specific jobs. Further, enlisted men and women are also encouraged to obtain a bachelor's degree during enlistment while officers are encouraged to pursue a graduate degree (Shea & Fishback, 2012). Often soldiers were motivated to join the military as a means of financing higher education with most soldiers using GI benefits to pay for college after they are out of the military. Others, who had not initially planned to use the education benefits of military service, see college as a buffer between the military and the civilian world at the time of discharge (Lighthall, 2012).

The military instills the confidence to plan for success, overcome challenges, and follow through on commitments, but often student veterans need help in translating these abilities to school and an already busy life. Many are first generation college students and although they may have more life experience they still face the challenges of not knowing where to go for help, what questions to ask, and how to advocate for themselves within the academic system. They need to learn the language of higher education as they once learned the jargon of the military (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014).

CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

The change from the military culture to the civilian culture of the university can be described as a dual process; one of "creating a narrative" and one of "becoming an ex" so individuals are at once being socialized into a new identity and dealing with the lasting effects of the previous one (Ebaugh as cited in Anderson, 2012). Lighthall writes that "former military personnel report feeling not just disoriented, but deeply alienated from the rest of America; not just sad over the loss of friendships, but devastated over the loss of brothers and sisters; not just a temporary destabilizing of identity, but a complete identity crisis" (Lighthall, 2012, pp. 81–82). Additionally, being a *veteran* is more of a title than a role with a defined direction (Anderson, 2012), having far more to do with who a person was, not who they are. At the same time the veteran student is becoming an ex-soldier they are becoming a civilian student.

Veterans find themselves in a completely different culture when they transition from the structured comfort zone of the military to the unrestricted civilian academic world. A veteran officer who transitioned directly from a combat unit to a civilian university said in a research interview, "I was in a graduate program...and the majority of them [classmates] were civilians, and I was coming straight out of combat into a very liberal academic environment. I came to the understanding that the civilians, along with the instructors, did not understand the fight in Iraq or Afghanistan, or the big picture of what's going on between the East and West, and they took a very academic approach, as if the academic approach will always solve the problem" (Shea & Fishback, 2012, p. 56). Because of this difference of experience and perspective a veteran can have difficulty communicating with civilian peers and finding their way in the environment of the university, often feeling isolated because they are surrounded by students who have no understanding of their military or combat experience. To add to that student veterans often have spouses, children and jobs which set them apart from the traditional students with which they share the classroom.

An aspect of the veteran transition experience that has received little attention is the impact of pre-military socioeconomic class. In the current all-volunteer military, enlisted members are disproportionately from low-income or working class backgrounds and have the usual characteristics of first generation college students as well as class-specific behaviors and attitudes. The working class or poor families, as described by Anderson (2012), "are more likely to adopt a deferential stance toward authority... more passively receive information without questioning it, and may find the kind of reasoning and challenging of knowledge that characterize learning in higher education to be both unfamiliar and uncomfortable" (p. 34). Military service reinforces these characteristics. Callahan and Jarrat (2014) report that the military, in fact, often expects service members to fulfill duties without complaint regardless of the circumstances, therefore veteran students are hesitant to advocate for themselves. They are likened in some cases to international students in this regard and need to have coaching on when and how to express concerns constructively.

TRAUMA HISTORY AND POST COMBAT ISSUES

In discussing trauma it is important to remember that all veterans are not the same. Even those who have been in combat have had different types of experiences so there is no accurate generalization about trauma history (Roost, A. & Roost, N, 2014). It is not important to know the details of each veteran's experience, but it is important to understand the way they, as a population, perceive themselves and their experience. It is necessary to keep in mind that trauma is an injury, not a mental illness and that veterans do not want to be seen as victims. They see themselves as powerful warriors and "retain their self-belief of being "bulletproof" (Lighthall, 2012, p. 82) therefore it is in their military character to resist asking for help. Women in the military have to cope with being in what is still a man's domain so they have to do everything "better, faster, and smarter" to earn the respect of the men (Lighthall, 2012, p. 87). This tough independence can carry over to the academic environment.

There are three major types of trauma common in veterans returning from combat. They are physical injuries, mental health injuries including post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and military sexual trauma (MST), and traumatic brain injuries (TBI). Physical injuries are often more easily seen and accommodated and are most often addressed by campus disability services. This paper will focus on the less visible injuries of post traumatic stress, military sexual trauma and traumatic brain injuries which require a more nuanced understanding of trauma and accommodation.

Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a diagnosis of an extreme type of adjustment disorder. The person diagnosed with PTSD has "experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event, or events that involved actual or certain death, serious injury, or injury to the

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