

## Student Veteran Discussion Panels: Deconstructing the Traumatized Veteran Stigma on Campus

*Nicholas J. Osborne describes a series of discussion panels held at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign that helped the campus community learn more about the varied experiences of the student veterans in their midst and supported the student veterans in having a positive voice on campus.*

By Nicholas J. Osborne

“WHEN I MENTIONED TO MY ADVISOR that I was a Marine and served in Afghanistan, she got this look on her face that was strange, like she didn’t know what to say. There was this uncomfortable silence between us.” This comment was shared with me over coffee one morning by a student veteran who had recently arrived at our university.

It is no surprise to the higher education community that veterans are arriving on campuses across the country, and this population is forecasted to grow. Since the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance took effect in 2009, over one million veterans have pursued an educational program. Although resources designed to ease the transition from the military to a postsecondary setting have dramatically increased in recent years, the 2010 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) found that veterans feel less supported by their institutions and are less likely than non-veterans to engage with faculty and staff. Recently, the 2012 American Council on Education report by Lesley McBain, Young M. Kim, Bryan Cook, and Kathy Snead, “From Solider to Student II,” concluded that institutions are deficient in training faculty and staff

about military culture and the complexities surrounding veterans’ diverse service experiences.

With less than 1 percent of the American population having served in the military since 9/11 and the sparse number of veterans among the faculty and staff ranks of higher education, what opportunities exist for student veterans and the larger campus community to engage in dialogue that is both informative and supportive and addresses the complex layers associated with military service and readjustment, particularly in a time of war? Added to this, as educators, what assumptions do we ourselves hold when we communicate with student veterans? Are these beliefs accurate, and equally important, impeding our ability to connect with an increasingly diverse student body? Congruent with *About Campus* contributors Lynette Cook Francis, Amanda Kraus, and David T. Vacchi, who highlight the confluence of military and academic cultures and the necessity of creating conditions that build awareness of service members’ presence on campus, this article describes discussion panels that were designed to assist student veterans with sharing their personal narratives related to their military and readjustment experiences. This article describes how the panels enhanced

the visibility of veterans' issues on our campus by providing a student veteran *voice* and was written as a practical programming strategy with the intention that readers can adapt a similar model as appropriate to their institutional needs.

## BUILDING A NEW VETERANS PROGRAM— GETTING STARTED

A LITTLE OVER THREE YEARS AGO, I accepted a position as an assistant dean of students and director of veterans' support services at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. As a former Coast Guard officer and readjustment therapist for the Department of Veterans Affairs, I am comfortable working with military personnel, though I sensed an uncertainty about this population from several colleagues. For instance, during the orientation meetings I attended in my first months on the job, I answered many questions about posttraumatic stress and the potential for violence among veterans. One faculty member asked, "I have a student in my class who served in Iraq—should I be concerned?" Although mindful of the severity and very real aspects of these questions, my peers were well intentioned though grossly misinformed of the complexities of veterans' experiences both in the military and on campus. The conversations we shared were one-sided and disproportionately focused on trauma rather than the gifts and leadership that veterans bring with them to higher education.

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Veterans are a unique group within higher education. Their broad range of life experiences can enhance course material and class discussions, while the discipline and work ethic they gained in the military prepares them well to succeed as students. My initial

experiences with my colleagues suggested that there was a need for a broader conversation to take place on our campus that highlighted these strengths. Based on this, I began a robust faculty and staff training that resulted in monthly workshops regarding military culture and the transitional barriers that veterans encounter while leaving the military. The workshops were designed to give faculty and staff tools for working with veterans and included questions and comments such as: What was it like over there? Do you think we should be over there? Are we winning? Did you kill anyone? Did you see anyone die? Do you have to go back? Are you okay? This is like Vietnam. This war is unnecessary.

**Focus Groups.** In addition to prioritizing faculty and staff training and in an effort to connect with my students to understand the climate they perceived on campus, I conducted two focus groups as part of a needs assessment for the

veterans program. During our focus groups, several veterans articulated that they felt out of place on campus. As nontraditional learners, they described the challenges of juggling their academic pursuits with family, work commitments, and participating in campus-based activities. Others described a loss of camaraderie upon leaving the military in addition to difficulties connecting with their peers, whom many felt were young and immature. Faculty, staff, and the administration were also viewed with suspicion due to an overwhelming perception that disclosing oneself as a veteran subsequently led to stereotypic images that centered disproportionately on trauma and violence, or worse, a political conversation about the war. These initial interactions humanized what I have read in the literature in terms of veterans feeling isolated, as an invisible

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population, or simply misunderstood, and further reinforced the necessity of having an established office on campus to support and advocate for them. Additionally, the *unstable and traumatized veteran* stigma suggested that in order for our university to be authentically veteran friendly and to prevent our students from developing a limiting “us versus them” attitude, we would need to engage in conversations that went beyond trauma and that accentuated the unique experiences and maturity that veterans bring to campus. To facilitate this process, I partnered with our Student Veterans Organization (SVO) to bolster visibility of veterans’ issues through student veteran discussion panels.

### STUDENT VETERAN DISCUSSION PANELS

**The Process.** Our first discussion panel consisted of five student veterans. During the planning phase, the group emphasized that they did not want the panel to focus on anything specific in terms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), readjustment problems, politics of the war, or similar “agenda.” As one student stated, “Just let us talk about our experiences without it being analyzed or placed into some category.” Additionally, the students agreed to use “I-statements” when answering questions. This was agreed upon to emphasize that responses reflected a panelist’s individual experience and was included to minimize speaking on behalf of the entire group or for veterans and the military in general. In terms of physical space, we selected a large room inside our student union and advertised the event through a combination of flyers and listserv announcements. The students were apprehensive about speaking at a podium, so we set up a long table with everyone seated together with an individual microphone. Per their request, I also participated in the panel to discuss my experiences working with veterans as well as my own military journey. A colleague from the counseling center on campus served as the panel facilitator. We began the panel by introducing the panelists; this

included a brief overview of their branch of service, military occupational specialty (MOS), which is essentially the job they performed in the military, places they served, as well as what they were studying and their career aspirations.

**Initial Questions.** After introducing the panelists, the facilitator and I emphasized to the audience that the panel was not designed around a specific topic. We briefly touched on the complexity of military service and the necessity of hearing our students’ personal narratives as a way of gaining accurate understanding of their military backgrounds and the ways that we can support them as a community. Questions posed to the panelists were as follows:

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- Tell us about why you joined the military.
- What was a typical day on active duty like? Tell us about any deployments you experienced.
- Describe your transitional experience leaving the military and enrolling at the university.
- What do you feel is important for nonmilitary faculty and staff to know about student veterans?

- Do you believe that veterans are portrayed accurately in the media?
- In what ways do you feel veterans are misunderstood?
- How can this university better support student veterans?

After these initial questions, we turned it over to the audience for a Q-and-A session.

**Noteworthy Comments.** The panel revealed the multilayered and complex experiences held by veterans on our campus. One veteran explained that she never heard a gunshot during her deployment to Iraq, though she described her transition home as difficult in terms of the strain the yearlong separation had on her marriage. In her words, “We simply grew apart

during my deployment. I came home and we were both different people, and I had a lot to sort through in terms of do I still want this and what is my new mission now that I'm a civilian again." She added that when people found out that she served in Iraq they naturally assumed she had been traumatized. "I don't think a lot of us know what to say when we come home, especially to people who've never served. You've been away from your normal life for so long and everyone around you has moved on, too. ... It's a catch-22—if you don't say anything, then they assume you're too traumatized to open up, and if you share anything ominous, it just reinforces a belief they already have."

Another veteran added that his deployment to Afghanistan had matured him. He explained what it was like to be in charge of a squad of Marines in a combat zone and of the irony that he was not yet legally allowed to drink alcohol: "I hear a lot of students in my classes complain about trivial things or they show up unprepared or late or they're sitting there on Facebook. I treat my classes like a job, and I'm a much more dedicated student than I was in high school."

Several panelists noted that they were apprehensive about returning to school after having been out of an educational environment for several years. Added to this, one veteran remarked that the military taught him to be self-sufficient and independent to the point that he was weary of asking school officials for assistance in the admissions process: "It's like you're told from day one in boot camp, deal with it, figure it out, and don't whine. After years of this, there's a mentality that develops that makes it hard to ask for help."

It is worth mentioning that prior to their enrollment in higher education, many veterans have lived throughout the world and immersed themselves in different cultures, aside from Iraq and Afghanistan. They have also lived and worked with a diverse military

workforce. One panelist, a first-generation student, spoke three languages and served as an advisor to the Indonesian government during his four-year enlistment. The fast-paced and technical training the military provides instills members with a strong sense of discipline and teamwork while offering them vast opportunities to apply their skills in real-world environments.

As military scholars Anthony M. Hassan, Robert "Jeff" Jackson, Douglas R. Lindsay, Damian G. McCabe, and Joseph E. Sanders III explain:

Most veterans today have had many broad, unique, positive, and insightful developmental experiences during their military service. Many of these veterans have survived, endured, and excelled in artificial and real-world situations, leaving them both resilient and self-confident. (p. 31)

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of how it supported or challenged their existing beliefs about student veterans and the military. The survey revealed that the audience had minimal interactions with veterans through their work and that most of the assumptions they held about the military and veterans in general were obtained through the media. Nine respondents stated that the panel assisted them in confronting their beliefs that most returning veterans have been traumatized and are having difficulty with their readjustment. Additionally, six surveys from faculty revealed that they were impressed by the maturity and life experiences shared by the panelists and interested in ways to embed the information into their coursework for their nonmilitary students. Twenty-two

## **PROGRAM ASSESSMENT**

### **AN ANONYMOUS SURVEY WAS PROVIDED**

to the audience members to assess the effectiveness of the discussion panels. Of the approximate sixty audience members, twenty-three surveys were completed. The survey asked the audience to evaluate the information shared by the panelists in terms

respondents (96 percent) reported that the panels were “highly effective” at providing a student veteran voice and for enhancing visibility of their presence on campus.

In addition to the survey, a post-focus group was conducted with the panelists and seven members of the Student Veterans Organization who attended the panel. The panelists shared that they felt empowered and proud to discuss their experiences in the military with the larger campus. One panelist shared that he initially thought the audience would be confrontational and subsequently seek to discredit his service, but instead he felt respected and “honored to show another side to the violent and unstable veteran image.” Anecdotally, one student affairs staff member stated that the panel made her feel “less intimidated” to work with veterans, while a Vietnam veteran from the local community shared that the panel helped ease some of the perceived “antimilitary propaganda that I always felt permeated this place.” Although the panel was by no means an end point at addressing the complexity and emotions surrounding this topic, it encouraged a broader dialogue and a place to start for both our veterans and the larger campus.

Shortly after the panel, three faculty members contacted my office to request that student veterans serve as guest speakers in their classes. One veteran also created a *Faculty and Staff Resources* section on our website that included key journal articles and best practice resources. Additionally, local media embedded veterans’ experiences into their columns. One large community newspaper provided a seven-week series on veterans’ issues, highlighting a different student veteran each week as well as service projects that our SVO spearheaded, such as a care package drive for deployed National Guard units and a fundraiser for local homeless veterans. As the visibility of

veterans’ issues increased on our campus, we eventually hosted, in collaboration with our counseling center, a national diversity conference that focused on veterans in higher education. This experience demonstrated the necessity of creating a *context* through collaboration and conversation rather than a series of isolated events that came exclusively from the “veterans’ office.”

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## CLOSING THOUGHTS

**RAISING AWARENESS  
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EXPERIENCES** of veterans is vital for developing effective student services and creating a welcoming environment on campus. To date, we have completed six student veteran discussion panels. To adequately serve our veterans, we must reevaluate our biases and misconceptions about military culture and provide venues for veterans to share their personal narratives. The impending surge of veterans promises not only increased demands on support services and the necessity of a well-informed staff, but also an increased supply of resilient, hardworking, and capable students. In short, student veterans possess a unique maturity and capability that enhance campus diversity as well as our institutional mission to cultivate future leaders.

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