Veteran Ally: Practical Strategies for Closing the Military-Civilian Gap on Campus

Nicholas J. Osborne

Abstract Since the Post-9/11 GI Bill was enacted in 2009, student veteran populations have nearly doubled while services that support their transition to higher education have dramatically increased. Despite a surge in resources, however, institutions are deficient in training faculty and staff about veterans' issues, consequently leaving student veterans susceptible to inaccurate perceptions about their service and wellbeing. In an effort to provide an inclusive environment for service members, this article discusses findings from two focus groups and 14 interviews with student veterans. Recommendations for training faculty and staff and enhancing the visibility of veterans' issues through Veteran Ally training and student veteran discussion panels are discussed.

Keywords Student veterans · Multicultural competence · Faculty and staff development

In the summer of 2008 Congress approved the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act as a benefit to more than two million service members engaged in over a decade of fighting in the Middle East and in military operations around the globe. The "Post-9/11 GI Bill," as it is often called, provides eligible veterans with generous financial support for postsecondary education including a housing allowance and stipend for books and fees (Radford, 2011). Robust financial aid opportunities along with the recent drawdown of operations in Iraq and high rates of unemployment in the civilian sector suggest that student veteran populations will rise steadily in the future (Elliott, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2011). Since taking effect in 2009, more than 817,000 veterans have pursued an educational program under the Post-9/11 GI Bill (Sander, 2013).

The transition from a highly structured military environment to a college or university can be overwhelming for veterans, who may confront a variety of barriers during their transition in areas related to academic preparedness and confidence, Veterans Affairs administrative procedures, denial of academic credit for military training as well as combat-related mental

Nicholas J. Osborne has a Doctorate in Educational Leadership from the University of California, Davis; a Master of Arts in Sociology from Humboldt State University; and a Bachelor of Science from Lees-McRae College. He is Assistant Dean of Students and the Director of Veterans Programs at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He can be reached at nosborne@illinois.edu

N. J. Osborne (✉)
Veteran Student Support Services, 300 Student Services Building, 610 East John Street, Champaign, IL 61820, USA
e-mail: nosborne@illinois.edu

Springer

and physical disabilities (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; Armstrong, Best, & Domenici, 2005; Hassan et al., 2010). These stressors are made more complex by veterans' perceptions that faculty and staff members do not understand military culture or the challenges veterans face when transitioning to an academic setting (Berrett, 2011; Cook & Kim, 2009).

To serve veterans effectively many institutions have implemented specific programs or an independent veterans office to mitigate the stressors associated with transitioning to a civilian higher education environment (Herrmann, Raybeck, & Wilson, 2008; Lokken, Pfeffer, McAuley, & Strong, 2009). Despite an increase in student service programs, fewer than half of the schools that offer these resources provide training to faculty and staff designed to enhance understanding about military culture and veterans' unique needs and transitional issues (O'Herrin, 2011). In July 2012, the American Council on Education released a report based on a survey of 700 institutions that was designed to assess the diverse range of campus programs and services offered to veterans. The report, *From Soldier to Student II* (McBain, Kim, Cook, & Snead, 2012), found that initiatives designed to assist veterans with their transition to higher education have increased dramatically over the past three years since the Post-9/11 GI Bill took effect. However, the report also concluded that institutions are deficient in training faculty and staff about military culture and the complexities surrounding veterans' diverse service experiences.

The Complex Layers of Military Service

Many veterans today have persevered through incredibly arduous circumstances although as a group veterans are difficult to characterize (Sander, 2012). Exposure to demanding conditions including the threat of serious injury or death, numerous deployments, and separation from their families are only some of the stressors to which veterans may be exposed during their time in the service (Basham, 2008). Some research suggests that as many as 50% of post-9/11 veterans have experienced an emotionally distressing event while on active duty (Pew Research Center, 2011). Upon leaving the military, veterans may confront multiple physical, cognitive, and emotional challenges during their transition to civilian life (Elliott et al, 2011). However, although consideration of these points should not be minimized, not all veterans view their service as traumatic (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011).

Prior to their enrollment in higher education, many veterans have lived throughout the world and have immersed themselves in different cultures, most recently including Iraq and Afghanistan. Additionally, they may have served and worked in various regions of the U.S. and have interacted with a diverse military workforce spanning numerous socioeconomic strata (Hassan et al., 2010). The fast-paced and technical training the military provides instills its members with a strong sense of discipline and teamwork while offering them a variety of opportunities to apply their skills in real-world situations (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Before pursuing a degree many veterans have mastered foreign languages, worked with foreign governments, operated and maintained expensive and high tech equipment, managed others, performed life-saving medical duties, and applied critical leadership and decision-making skills in tense situations. As Hassan et al. (2010) explained,

> 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).

The complex layers of veterans' experiences, which has been referred to as a combination of "rewards and burdens" (Pew Research Center, 2011), coupled with a lack of familiarity with military culture within the larger campus community create several challenges for institutions that are seeking to streamline services and support veterans effectively. On the one hand, veterans may be viewed as a population that is unprepared for higher education and is affected by multiple, combat-related stressors and consequently requiring a high degree of institutional assistance. However, in contrast to this perspective, veterans may be perceived as an autonomous and mature cohort of students with advanced professional backgrounds and life experiences that differentiate them from their non-military peers. Adding to the complexity, research on campus environments indicate that veterans feel less supported by their institutions and are less likely than non-veterans to engage with faculty members (NSSE, 2010), thus contributing to their invisibility (Livingston et al., 2011).

Addressing the Problem

A supportive and informed higher education community is a key component of veterans' success (Lighthall, 2012). The systematic increase in veteran enrollment adds another diverse group to the higher education student population, and these individuals need faculty and staff members with multicultural competencies. In contrast to previous generations, contemporary faculty and staff have limited firsthand experience with the military, and with wartime service in particular (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). As the Pew Research Center (2011) pointed out, only a fraction of Americans, one-half of 1%, have served on active military duty over the past decade. A lack of understanding of military culture, referred to as a "military-civilian gap," coupled with media headlines that focus heavily on post-traumatic stress disorder (Hayes, 2012), traumatic brain injury (St. John, 2011) and violent behavior (Johnson, 2012) make veterans susceptible to inaccurate stereotypes about their wellbeing and capacity to integrate themselves into the campus community as students (Hadley, 2010; Hassan et al., 2010). Efforts to assist this integration become even more challenging because of perceptions that higher education is an "anti-military" institution (Briggs, 2012), which may explain why students withhold their veteran status as a way to shield themselves from potentially unfavorable interactions with faculty members and peers (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Herrmann et al., 2008; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011).

As post-secondary institutions become more diverse and as veteran enrollment increases, it is imperative that higher education personnel develop awareness of the complex and multiple identities of students so that they can introduce effective programming initiatives (Butcher, Taylor, & Wallace, 2012). For serving veterans this includes enhancing the understanding of military culture and the challenges and complexities that veterans experience when transitioning to a college or university (Vacchi, 2012). Drawing on findings from two focus groups and interviews with 14 veterans, this article provides recommendations for enhancing the visibility and understanding of veterans' issues through faculty and staff professional development activities. The *Veteran Ally* training discussed in this article was modeled on the LGBT Safe Zone program, which researchers found effective for increasing the visibility and improving the climate related to LGBT issues (Poynter & Tubbs, 2008). The Veteran Ally training was designed to educate campus personnel about military culture and to provide them with strategies for working with veterans. Thematic findings from this study provided the content and structure of the Veteran Ally training.

I also discuss in this article how veteran discussion panels were implemented to stimulate a dialogue between veterans and others within the campus community. Some scholars have

recommended that institutions create opportunities for a respectful dialogue between and among groups in an effort to deconstruct stereotypical assumptions about veterans and the military (Ackerman & DiRamio, 2009; Cook & Kim, 2009). The veteran discussion panels were initiated on our campus in order to support this crucial engagement.

Recommendations to increase campus awareness of veterans' diverse experiences and needs are present in the literature; however, applied practices concerning professional development training and other initiatives have not been frequently reported. Due to a lack of literature in this area, strategies employed at a large (over 40,000 students), public, four-year university in the Midwest are discussed with the hope that readers will be interested in integrating practices, as they see appropriate, into their own institutional environments.

Purpose of the Study

In January 2011 I was hired as an assistant dean of students and charged with developing a veterans program at a major public research university that currently serves approximately 400 veterans. Veteran Student Support Services (VSSS) was a new program within student affairs, designed to support veterans' academic and social transition to the University. Shortly after being hired I received approval from the Institutional Review Board to conduct two focus groups and interviews with fourteen veterans who were all members of the University's Student Veterans Organization (SVO). SVOs provide integral opportunities to hear firsthand of veterans' experiences with academic and social transitions and to hear about their perceptions of the institutional climate (Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009). The purpose of the study was to gain insight into the transitional experiences of veterans at our university, and it provided the participants the opportunity to discuss their military backgrounds and their transitional journey to become students. Through this process we sought to discover ways that the University can more effectively assist veterans with their transition in addition to working with the faculty and staff to enhance their understanding and to provide them with tools for working with service members. The findings from the focus groups and interviews were used to inform the structure of the new veterans program, with specific emphasis on providing the content for the Veteran Ally training. The students had been made aware that their participation and contributions would provide a framework for how we serve veterans through the VSSS office and for introducing faculty and staff development activities, enabling us to "get their message" out into the larger campus community. Several students positively reported that their participation gave them a sense of ownership in the new veterans program.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative framework and was grounded in constructivism, which holds that knowledge is developed from the interpretations of experiences and social interactions rather than from a single, objective reality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The theoretical perspective was phenomenology, an approach that seeks to understand a given phenomenon from the perspectives of the research participants (Moustakas, 1994). This approach was appropriate for the study because I sought to understand from the participants' points of view the constructions, interpretations, and meanings they attached to their experiences and social interactions as student veterans.

Participants

This study was conducted at a large (over 40,000 students), four-year, public land-grant university in the Midwest. I recruited participants by emailing information about the study to a veterans' listserv that I maintain. Of the approximate 280 undergraduate veterans on the listserv, eighteen volunteered to participate. During a required informational meeting that contained details about me, the principal researcher, and the study's purpose, fourteen of the eighteen veterans agreed to participate. The four veterans that withdrew from the study reported that it conflicted with their employment or academic schedules. The 14 undergraduate veterans included 10 men and 4 women, ranging in age from 22 to 30. Eight participants identified as White, three as Latino/Latina, two as Asian, and one as Black. Participants averaged 3.5 years on active duty in the military, and each participant had deployed at least once to either Iraq and/or Afghanistan.

Data Collection

Two focus groups with all 14 participants present and two in-depth, open-ended, one-on-one interviews were conducted. Multiple focus groups and interviews gave the participants opportunities to think about the research questions in greater detail and to reflect on the comments, questions, and themes that had emerged from the initial focus group and initial interview. The first focus group and interview generally consisted of broad open-ended questions while the second focus group and interview explored and discussed participants' earlier comments and the themes that had emerged. Each focus group and interview was approximately 60 minutes each. The following questions were included.

- What challenges did you encounter while transitioning to the university?
- What do you feel is important for non-military faculty and staff to know about veterans?
- What questions and comments about your service do you find offensive?
- How can this University better support veterans on campus?

Findings

As I analyzed the data that emerged from the study, I reflected on themes and perspectives from the existing literature on veterans, faculty and staff development, and student development.

Military Culture

Consistent with the work of Livingston et al. (2011), veterans in this study defined the military as a strict and hierarchical institution that had contributed to their maturation. Their military experiences made it challenging for them to relate to their younger peers, whom several veterans described as immature and "out of touch" with the world. Six of fourteen participants in the first focus group articulated challenging living conditions, such as spending long hours in close proximity to others in cramped spaces, long and irregular work schedules, rigorous performance evaluations, separation from their loved ones, and a chain-of-command structure as aspects of military culture that were very different from the life experiences of their civilian classmates. As a pre-med veteran explained:

I'm shocked at how undisciplined and rude a lot of students are. They come to class late or in their pajamas, and they talk back to the instructor, or they have a story why

they didn't finish their assignment. Most of them screw around on Facebook and are minimally engaged.

Several described the military as an institution that is built upon and privileges traditional, hegemonic, masculine values. They commented that they considered assertiveness, physical aggression and competitiveness, often explained in reference to physical fitness training and military occupational specialty (combat-oriented jobs versus non-combat jobs), and withholding emotion to be attributes of military culture. One female veteran who deployed to Iraq with her National Guard unit explained as follows.

It's still a good old boys club, and I think women have to work harder to get respect. Like, I never fell out of a run the whole time I was in. It would've made me look like I couldn't hang; you know, like I couldn't hack it. Even as a student I feel this need to be independent, like don't whine about things, don't get emotional, just figure it out, get it done and move on.

Applying these statements to their transition to the university, these veterans stated that it was difficult to ask campus personnel for assistance given that they came from a military environment that expected self-sufficiency and resourcefulness. To ease their transition, participants articulated the necessity of connecting with fellow veterans for both social support and to receive "straightforward information" regarding strategies for navigating through the complexities of the campus, which included registering for classes, setting-up military financial aid benefits, and securing off-campus housing.

Connection to the Institution

Building on comments concerning their feelings of being separate from their civilian classmates, the veterans in this study described their departure from the service and subsequent enrollment in higher education as a process characterized by a loss of community and camaraderie followed by isolation. Several participants emphasized the bonds that had been created through their military service and described how these relationships were strengthened through their combat deployment. Upon enrolling in higher education, 11 of 14 participants reported that they felt older than their peers. Although some veterans referenced chronological age, several emphasized that they felt less connected to their peers due to disparities in life experience. As one veteran remarked,

I had to sit in this mandatory orientation for first years, and it was brutal. I mean, these kids were right out of their parents' homes. I had traveled around the world and was a squad leader in my platoon. I felt out of place, and the professor wasn't really sure what to do with me.

Additionally, several reported family and work commitments as other types of obligations that separated them from their civilian peers. One student, a female veteran and single-mother who had served two tours in Iraq reported how she commuted to class several times each week and did not feel part of the larger campus community. She said,

Some people say that college is supposed to be the time of your life; like parties and being involved in a bunch of different stuff, but it's a job for me. I pretty much just go to class and study, but I don't really feel like I'm a part of anything here.

Others said that their SVO provided them with a stable community in which they could engage and interact with peers who had served in the military and who could relate to the

demands that were consistent with those other non-traditional students faced, such as balancing work, family, and academic commitments.

The Unstable and Potentially Dangerous Veteran Stigma

A perception that their military status was often met by professors and peers with uncertainty or suspicion with regard to their mental health and wellbeing was widely discussed in each focus group and interview. Participants provided several examples of what they believe their non-military professors and peers think of when they hear the word *veteran*. These included images of homeless Vietnam veterans in tattered army jackets, elderly white men who served in World War II, individuals who enlisted because they were not "college material," and young men who are contending with post-traumatic stress. The latter comment generated much discussion in both the focus groups and interviews. As one transfer student veteran described:

> I'm tired of telling people here that I served in Afghanistan, and then they look at me with this expression, like, "is this guy going to snap my neck…is he okay?" When I told my advisor that I'd served in Afghanistan, the first thing she did was tell me about the really good counseling center they have on campus.

Another veteran added the following comment, "If the military comes up in my classes, it's either about how wrong and unjust the war is or how all the returning vets are coming home crazy and violent."

Five participants criticized the media for sensationalizing trauma-focused topics such as post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injury while neglecting to identify the strengths and resilience that veterans possess. One participant explained that he felt much more mature and "capable" as a student than his peers based on his military experiences although he did not believe that this image was widely shared within the campus community. He commented, "I grew-up fast. I experienced a lot in a short period of time, and I'm a better man because of it; but I think the people around here have this view that veterans come back broken and dispirited."

Summary

The findings from this study suggest that there is significant variation in terms of the level of support that veterans experience when transitioning to a post-secondary environment. When separating from the military all personnel are required to attend a Department of Defense Transitional Assistance Program (commonly referred to as "TAP") that ranges in length from a few days to an entire week. Participants stated that their TAP training was primarily designed to assist them with finding employment and as one participant remarked, "…to live in the civilian world again." Although military benefits were included in the TAP, several participants reported that their TAP counselor possessed limited information on the Post-9/11 GI Bill and was unprepared to answer their questions regarding the college application process, which many found confusing and intimidating. These points reinforce the necessity of having a clearly established liaison or veterans' office on campus to assist with military-specific questions and the transition process.

The findings from this study also suggest that, once on campus, veterans reported that they felt separated from the larger student body. This separateness was explained partially in terms of work-life commitments and chronological age, but it was more commonly described as a perception that their military service provided them with a maturity and collection of life experiences that were unique and very different from those of their peers.

The most prominent theme that emerged from this study relates to campus climate. A majority of participants (9 of 14) stated that they were initially concerned about attending our University based on a perception that it was "liberal" and therefore "anti-military." Participants explained that these feelings were strengthened by their interactions with civilian classmates and professors, who they felt had made derogatory or overly simplistic comments about the military and the current conflicts in the Middle East. Additionally, participants in this study explained a perception that disclosing one's self as a veteran was risky and left them vulnerable to inaccurate assumptions about their mental health and overall wellbeing.

Discussion

The way the participants in this study described their transitional experiences from the military to a postsecondary institution reinforces much of the literature on veterans in higher education. The findings suggest that veterans require a moderate amount of assistance from university personnel during their initial transition in addition to specialized support once they are on campus. Offering faculty and staff development programs on veterans' issues, particularly in areas related to military culture and the limiting stereotypes that focus disproportionately on violence and trauma, were emphasized as essential for creating a veteran-friendly campus. Participants also articulated the necessity of creating initiatives that raise the visibility of veterans' issues and that provide for a campus-wide dialogue so that non-veteran personnel could learn more about the military and the complexities of military service while also addressing assumptions that may contribute to stereotyping. To meet these goals, at the conclusion of the study I collaborated with three student veterans to create the Veteran Ally training and to develop our first student veteran discussion panel.

Veteran Ally Training and Student Panel

The goal of the Veteran Ally training is to develop a knowledgeable and supportive network of faculty and staff members who will serve as veteran liaisons in their colleges or administrative offices. This model provides veterans with a direct point of contact at various units across campus and has been invaluable when veterans need specialized support such as the time when a student was called to active duty halfway through the semester. The Veteran Ally training is structured around the thematic findings of this study and is designed to educate the larger campus about military culture as well as what our veterans confront as students. I present the trainings twice per month, and at times a veteran accompanies me to provide feedback and to answer questions from the participants. The training provides participants with the following learning outcomes:

- Recognize transitional issues commonly experienced by student veterans,
- Describe characteristics of the student veteran population on our campus,
- Identify key aspects of military culture and discuss how these aspects may create challenges for veterans in higher education,
- Identify referral resources on-campus and within the community available to student veterans,
- Identify questions and comments that student veterans find offensive.

Additionally, to encourage participants in the training to become mindful about their own perceptions of veterans and the military in general, I begin each presentation with an exercise that asks the following questions: *How do I view veterans? Where do my perceptions come*

from (personal experience, the media, other)? Provided below are further details for those who might wish to develop a similar training at their institutions.

Questions and Comments to Avoid when Working with Veterans

The following questions and comments are likely to make veterans feel uncomfortable.

- 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.

Student Veteran Discussion Panel

The student veteran discussion panel provided an opportunity for our veterans to "tell their stories" and to field questions from faculty and staff as well as their peers. The panel was open to the entire campus and was advertised through a combination of listserv announcements and flyers. When creating safety guidelines for the panel, the veterans in this study emphasized several points.

No Agenda. The student veteran discussion panel was not advertised nor constructed around specific themes such as trauma, PTSD, politics of the war, or similar itinerary. As one student requested:

   Just let us talk about our experiences without everyone trying to analyze it or place what we're saying into some category. This place likes to categorize everything, like if we talk about war, then we have to talk about trauma, and then we have to talk about homelessness and violence.

   We began the panel with a series of basic questions. After these initial questions, the panelists fielded questions from the audience.

- Tell us about your service. Why did you join the military?
- What was a typical day on active duty like?
- Describe your experiences while deployed.
- Describe your transitional experiences leaving the military and enrolling at the university.
- What do you feel is important for the faculty and staff to know about veterans?
- Do you believe that veterans are portrayed accurately in the media?
- In what ways do you feel that veterans are misunderstood?
- How can this University better support veterans?

Physical Space & Format. The panelists indicated that they did not want to speak at a podium. Based on this, the panel consisted of two long tables inside a large conference room within our Student Union that allowed the speakers to sit with individual microphones. I

emphasized at the beginning of the panel that each veteran had the option to comment or pass on a question and that the purpose of our panel was to generate a broader dialogue about veterans' experiences rather than a political discourse. At the request of several veterans I also participated in the panel; I primarily discussed my experiences working with veterans in higher education as well as my own military journey. I also provided affirmation and support after veterans shared their experiences, particularly those of a sensitive nature.

I-Statements. Each participant utilized "I-statements" to emphasize that this was *his/her* experience. This strategy was included to minimize speaking on behalf of the entire group. As one veteran shared about his deployment in Iraq,

> Nothing pissed me off more than when the media interviewed the token private about what happened, and then they did a whole story based on that kid's comments. They never captured what really happened or how complicated it all was.

Assessment and Recommendations

At the conclusion of each Veteran Ally training an anonymous feedback survey is provided to participants. Although the training is still being conducted, the surveys collected to this point reveal that the training is effective at providing participants with an understanding of military culture and of the stressors that veterans may encounter during their transition to the University. The surveys also reveal that participants find the questions and comments to avoid when working with veterans particularly helpful for providing them with practical strategies for engaging with veterans.

An anonymous survey was also provided to the panel audience to assess the effectiveness of the discussion panel. Of the approximate 60 audience members, 23 surveys were completed. The survey asked each audience member to evaluate the information shared by the panelists in terms of how it supported or challenged their existing beliefs about veterans and the military. The survey revealed that the audience had minimal interactions with veterans through their work on campus and that most of their assumptions about the military and veterans in general were obtained through the media. Nine respondents stated that the panel assisted them in confronting their belief that most returning veterans have been traumatized and are having difficulty with their readjustment. Additionally, six surveys from faculty members revealed that they were impressed by the maturity and life experiences shared by the panelists and interested in embedding the information into their coursework for their non-military students. Twenty-two respondents reported that the panels were "highly effective" at providing a veteran voice and enhancing the 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 SVO who had attended the event. The panelists shared their feeling that they felt empowered and "proud" to discuss their military experiences with the larger campus. One panelist reported that he initially thought the audience would be confrontational and subsequently seek to discredit his service. Instead he felt respected and, "honored to show another side to the violent and unstable veteran image." Anecdotally, a student affairs administrator confided that the panel made her feel "less intimidated" to work with student veterans while a Vietnam veteran from the local community remarked that the panel had helped ease the perceived "anti-military propaganda that I always felt permeated this place." Although the panel was by no means an end point for addressing the complexity and

emotions surrounding veterans and their experiences, it encouraged a broader dialogue and a place to start on our campus.

Shortly after the discussion panel concluded, three faculty members contacted my office with requests that veterans serve as guest speakers in their classes. One veteran also created a "Faculty & Staff Resources" section on our website that included several key journal articles and best practices resources. Local media embedded veterans' experiences into their columns while a large community newspaper provided a 7-week series on veterans' issues highlighting a different veteran each week as well as service projects our students spearheaded, such as a care package drive for deployed National Guard units and a fundraising activity for local homeless veterans. As visibility increased on campus, we eventually developed and hosted in collaboration with our counseling center a national diversity conference that focused on veterans' issues in higher education.

Recommendations

This study and the student veteran discussion panel concluded approximately six months after I was hired. In the two and a half years since the VSSS program started, we have trained over 500 Veteran Ally volunteers, and our student veterans have subsequently participated in six discussion panels. In spring 2013 I sent a survey to the veterans' listserv that asked, "Have we become more veteran-friendly over the past year?" Of the 407 student veterans on the listserv, 122 responded; and 96% of respondents stated, "Yes." The recommendations now offered were additionally derived from the findings of this study and continue to be an essential part of our veterans program.

Create a Veterans Advisory Committee. To develop a diverse range of perspectives and to enhance collaborative opportunities, I suggest the formulation of a committee made-up of persons from various student affairs units, student veterans, faculty and administrators, and community veterans. A committee is helpful for defining what "veteran-friendly" means for the specific institution.

Identify veterans, and make contact with them prior to their arrival on campus. Our institution identifies veterans through their admissions application and through the certification of their military benefits. Each semester I contact incoming veterans prior to their physical arrival on campus. This initial contact provides them with a direct point of contact at the institution and is helpful for making referrals to various campus and community offices before the rush of the first week of classes. During this initial contact I also link interested incoming veterans with a currently enrolled veteran sponsor. Veteran sponsors are volunteers who have been on campus for at least one year and provide mentoring as well as introducing the new veterans to other service members.

Establish a separate orientation for veterans. Each semester we host a separate orientation for veterans. The orientation is optional but provides incoming veterans with opportunities to meet currently enrolled veterans and to learn more about support services on campus and within the community. The orientation is structured as a "Kick Off," and we provide food and beverages. Over the past two years we have made the event informal based on feedback from our veterans.

Communicate with veterans often. My office maintains a veterans' listserv. Each week I send out announcements that pertain to veterans' topics such as campus activities, student organization

events, changes in VA benefits, and highlights of success stories such as veterans who make the dean's list. Students have positively reported that these weekly emails reinforce their feeling that the institution recognizes and is committed to serving their diverse needs.

Hold recognition ceremonies. Each year around Veterans Day our campus athletics office provides our veterans with free tickets to athletic events on campus. We started a tradition at these events whereby we take our veterans onto the football field and basketball court to be recognized by the larger community.

Establish a veterans' lounge. One of the most successful additions to our program was the student veteran lounge that opened in January 2013. The lounge, housed inside our popular student union, is open to all students but was created to honor our veterans in particular. With the assistance of veteran volunteers, the lounge provides a place for veterans to study, watch television, socialize, and access veteran-specific information.

Make resources that pertain to student veterans available to faculty and staff. We created a "Faculty & Staff Resources" link on our Veteran Student Support Services webpage. This section includes peer-reviewed and student-authored articles and resources that pertain to veterans' issues. We also included a FAQ section based on thematic questions that were raised during our Veteran Ally trainings. Resources should be screened carefully and crosschecked with veterans for accuracy in addition to being inspected for content. Topics that focus disproportionately on post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injury, and similar trauma-focused areas should be included only sparingly. Note also that the American Council on Education has developed a Toolkit for Veteran Friendly Institutions. http://www.vetfriendlytoolkit.org/. This useful webpage allows institutions to upload their own practices and to review best practices from other schools.

Collaborate with a career center, and host employers looking to hire veterans. Our veterans are career-focused and often request support with writing resumes and searching for employment. To meet these goals, we collaborate with our career center and offer workshops so that veterans can articulate their military accomplishments in civilian language and prepare for job interviews. We also host various employers throughout the semester who are looking to hire veterans.

Conclusion

Reintegration into a civilian community following military service can be a stressful time for veterans. In order for colleges and universities to support their veterans with this transition, a wide array of assistive resources must be made available. Although campus-based services for veterans have focused largely on educational benefits, which are necessary, strategies that raise awareness of the multi-layered and complex experiences surrounding military service are paramount for creating an environment that is authentically veteran-friendly.

To serve our veterans more effectively, we must, as educators, reevaluate our biases and misconceptions about military culture and provide venues for students to share their personal narratives. I believe we have a responsibility to do so. 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 stress-tested and capable talent. In short, these students possess a unique maturity and capability that enhances our diversity and the possibility of cultivating future leaders in our communities, states, and country.

References

Ackerman, R., & DiRamio, D. (Eds.). (2009). *Creating a veteran-friendly campus: Strategies for transition and success. New Directions for Student Services, 126*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Ackerman, R., DiRamio, D., & Mitchell, R. (2009). Transitions: Combat veterans as college students. In R. Ackerman & D. DiRamio (Eds.), *Creating a veteran-friendly campus: Strategies for transition and success: New Directions for Student Services, 126* (pp. 5–14). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Armstrong, K., Best, S., & Domenici, P. (2005). *Courage after fire: Coping strategies for troops returning from Iraq and Afghanistan and their families*. Berkeley, CA: Ulysses.

Basham, K. (2008). Homecoming as safe haven or the new front: Attachment and detachment in military couples. *Clinical Social Work Journal, 36*, 83–96.

Berrett, D. (2011, April 8). Words from wartime. *Inside Higher Ed.* Retrieved from: http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2011/04/08/veterans_in_college_have_vexed_relationship_to_writing_assignments

Briggs, B. (2012, October 17). Stray anti-military vibes reverberate as thousands of veterans head to college. *NBC News.* Retrieved from: http://usnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2012/10/17/14469487-stray-anti-military-vibes-reverberate-as-thousands-of-veterans-head-to-college?lite

Butcher, M., Taylor, F., & Wallace, W. (2012). Developing multiculturally competent staff members in higher education. *Journal of Student Affairs, 21*, 40–48.

Cook, B., & Kim, Y. (2009). *From soldier to student: Easing the transition of service members on campus*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.

DiRamio, D., Ackerman, R., & Mitchell, R. (2008). From combat to campus: Voices of student-veterans. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, 45*, 73–102.

DiRamio, D., & Jarvis, K. (2011). *Veterans in higher education: When Johnny and Jane come marching to campus*. Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass.

Elliott, M., Gonzalez, C., & Larsen, B. (2011). U.S. military veterans transition to college: Combat, PTSD, and alienation on campus. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, 48*, 279–296.

Hadley, C. (2010, February 11). Feeling like you fit in. *Military Times Edge.* Retrieved from: http://www.militarytimesedge.com/education/veteran-campus-life/ed_strat_serv_020110w/2/

Hassan, A. M., Jackson, R., Lindsay, D. R., McCabe, D. G., & Sanders III, J. E. (2010, May-June). The veteran student in 2010: How do you see me? *About Campus 15*. doi:10.1002/abc.20020

Hayes, A. (2012, January 17). Experts: Vets' PTSD, violence a growing problem. *CNN News.* Retrieved from: http://articles.cnn.com/2012-01-17/us/us_veterans-violence_1_iraq-war-vet-face-death-penalty-homeless-men?_s=PM:US

Herrmann, D. J., Raybeck, D., & Wilson, R. (2008, November 21). College is for veterans too. *The Chronicle of Higher Education, 55*(13), 99.

Johnson, K. (2012, January 26). Police get help with vets who are ticking bombs. *USA Today.* Retrieved from: http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/washington/story/2012-01-24/police-training-combative-veterans/52794974/1

Lighthall, A. (2012). Ten things you should know about today's student veterans. *Thought & Action, 28*, 81–90.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Livingston, W. G., Havice, P. A., Cawthon, T. C., & Fleming, D. S. (2011). Coming home: Student veterans' articulation of college re-enrollment. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, 48*, 315–331.

Lokken, J. M., Pfeffer, D. S., McAuley, J., & Stong, C. (2009). A statewide approach to creating veteran-friendly campuses. *Strategies for transition and success: New Directions for Student Services, 126*, 45–54. doi:10.1002/ss.315

McBain, L., Kim, Y., Cook, B., & Snead, K. (2012). *From soldier to student II: Assessing campus programs for veterans and service members*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education. Retrieved from: http://www.acenet.edu/links/pdfs/cpa/SoldiertoStudentII-2012.html

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

National Survey of Student Engagement (2010). *Major differences: Examining student engagement by field of study*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Education. Retrieved from: http://nsse.iub.edu/NSSE_2010_Results/

O'Herrin, E. (2011). Enhancing veteran success in higher education. *Peer Review, 13* Retrieved from: http://www.aacu.org/peerreview/pr-wi11/prwi11_oherrin.cfm

Poynter, K., & Tubbs, N. (2008). Safe Zones: Creating LGBT safe space ally programs. *Journal of LGBT Youth, 5*, 121–132.

Pew Research Social & Demographic Trends. (2011). *War and sacrifice in the post-9/11 era*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center. Retrieved from: http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/10/05/war-and-sacrifice-in-the-post-911-era/

Radford, A. W. (2011). *Military service members and veterans: A profile of those enrolled in undergraduate and graduate education in 2007-2008*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. 2011-163. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov

Rumann, C. B., & Hamrick, F. A. (2009). Supporting student veterans in transition. *New Directions for Student Services, 126*, 25–34. doi:10.1002/ss.313

Sander, L. (2012, March 11). Out of uniform: At half a million and counting, veterans cash in on Post 9/11 GI Bill. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from: http://chronicle.com/article/At-Half-a-Million-and/131112/

Sander, L. (2013, January 7). Veterans tell elite colleges: "We belong." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from: http://chronicle.com/article/At-Elite-Colleges-a-Push-to/136459/

St. John, A. (2011, February 9). Veterans struggle with TBI. *KPBS*. Retrieved from: http://www.kpbs.org/news/2011/feb/09/veterans-struggle-with-tbi/

Summerlot, J., Green, S., & Parker, D. (2009). Student veterans organizations. *Strategies for transition and success: New Directions for Student Services, 126*, 71–79.

Vacchi, D. (2012, May-June). Considering student veterans on the twenty-first-century college campus. *About Campus 17*. doi: 10.1002/abc.21075