Student Veterans in Higher Education: Resilience, Support, and Institutional Implications

Michael Carrell, Kirstan Duckett, Krystyne Savarese
1. Learning Outcomes
2. Institutional Setting and Context
3. Methods & Analysis
4. Key Results
5. Implications for Research and Practice
6. Discussion
As a result of this session, participants will be able to:

• Describe how student veterans navigate administrative processes and institutions of higher education
• List institutional barriers
• Identify desired support
• Discuss pedagogical implications and other institutional practices
• Relate findings to your home campuses
Institutional Setting and Context

The Ohio State University
• ~ 65,000 students enrolled
• More than 2,000 enrolled Student-Veterans/Military (+ Family)

Office of Military and Veterans Services (OMVS)
• Established in 2012 with 4 (now 5) OSU Staff
• Full-time Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) employee
• Build trust & help achieve academic success
• Refers student veterans to and works with other campus resources
• Reviews, advocates, and leads policy and program changes
• Key collaborator for this study
• Collaborative research project
  • Office of Military and Veterans Services, Parent and Family Relations, Student Advocacy, Center for the Study of Student Life

• Focus groups
  • Semi-structured
  • Trained facilitator, co-facilitator, and scribe in each session
  • OMVS provided list of students to recruit

• Phenomenological approach
  • Focus on veterans' lived experiences
  • 4 coders
  • Open coding to discover themes
  • Axial coding for themes
Five focus group sessions
- 24 participants: 17 male, 7 female
- 1 female only session

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Administrative
• Institutional policy, culture, environments

Academic
• Classroom experience, interaction with faculty, transitioning (back) to learning environment

Co-Curricular and Social
• Campus engagement, integration with peers, family involvement

*Implications will be discussed at the conclusion of our results
Administrative
Delayed VA Payments
- Lead to distracting, stressful
- Limit ability to buy books
- Create need for fee waivers, can result in Drop for Nonpayment

Enrollment Issues
- Withdrawals
- Availability of courses
- Concerns about advising/information

Financial Obligations
- Supporting a family
- VA support pauses during academic breaks
We have 36 months of GI Bill benefits… . You have 36 months of education to do something worthwhile, right? … You’ve got a ticking clock. Do the best you can with it… . There’s no time to screw around.
Desire more information, earlier
  • Prior to arrival on campus
  • Transition/Logistics

Knowing resources available
  • GI Bill, other Veteran benefits, and student resources
  • How VA and campus resources are related

Navigating resources on campus
  • Help-seeking behaviors
  • Rely on student veteran peers for guidance
You can get extra money besides your GI Bill… . You can get help with your academics… . A lot of people that I talked to were like, “Really? I didn’t know that.”

A lot of us are lost.
Veterans office on campus
  - Strong leadership representing veterans
  - VA and university collaboration

Other
  - Administration hierarchy vs. military chain of command
  - Accessibility on campus
There’s a lot of people here that are veterans that need somebody that can make a decision and that has the authority to make that decision and have it be binding.
Academic Experiences
Transitions
- Length of time since high school
- Comparison to military experience

Faculty and instructors
- Responsiveness to students
- Student veterans self-identifying
- Classroom management

Classroom interactions
- Participation
- Group work
Obstacles to success? For me, it was learning how to learn again ’cause there’s military learning and then there’s academic learning.

You can tell which professors are in it to help you out … and you can definitely tell which professors couldn’t give a crap about who you are or what you’re doin’.

I have a very infantry mindset … especially working with groups. I had to work on my language so it wasn’t coming off so aggressively.
Co-curricular Engagement and Peer Connections
Co-Curricular and Social- Peer Connections

Perceived disconnect from other students
- More life experience
- Age distinctions
- Value academics
- Role of alcohol

Desire to connect
- Other student veterans
- Requires intentionality

Self-identifying as a student veteran
- Decision to disclose status
- Frames interactions
Yeah, I kind of feel alone. I love my wife and I love my kid, but I don’t have anybody that I can relate to or talk to. I’m older than all the rest of my peers.

I don’t have anything in common with the people that I’m in class with, for the most part… there’s a big gap in your life standing.

They [civilian students] think you’re either a war hero, mentally disturbed, or both.
Co-Curricular and Social- Getting Involved

Reasons for being involved
• Meeting and/or helping peers
• Professional development

Reasons for not being involved
• Disconnect from civilian students
• Non-traditional responsibilities
• Focused on academics

Interest in more student veteran events
Before I started, the [student organization] president I met last year invited everyone over to his house for a barbecue, so I kinda got to meet a few people before classes started. That really made a huge difference to have just a few people to talk to.

I am not really involved with really any extracurriculars here at Ohio State. That’s just by choice… There’s no real reason I can formulate right now. I just haven’t. I don’t see myself into that, organizations and stuff.
Co-Curricular and Social- Families

Non-traditional family definition
  - Partners, children, independent, parents
  - Family expectations

May provide support
  - Moral
  - Financial
Kids with rich parents don’t become veterans in college.

They don’t—there’s no financial [laughter] –parents can’t help me at all. It’s just emotional they’re there for me. They just kinda motivate me and push me.

I’ve got four kids … My wife helps me out there. She understands. She’ll pick up any slack. … In the evening, I get home from work about 7:00 or so and she knows I’m tired and frustrated. Helps out getting everything ready and helping put the kids to bed.
Implications
Implications for Practice

• More/ Better/ Earlier information to incoming/new students

• Increased resources to office and programs

• Increased programming and new policy

• Classroom awareness for faculty, and general awareness for other students

• Think of “family” differently and program accordingly
Mostly what it comes down to is we’re—we have a little bit more experience. For the most part, we’re generally students, better students than most, but still students. [Laughter] A lot of the issues that come to me—come to mind to me with Ohio State are general student issues. They’re not necessarily special because I’m a veteran.

I don’t feel like I’ve been treated any differently than any other student. As far as improvement’s concerned, they would be general improvements, I think, for all considered.
Initiatives

- Peer-Peer Program & Veterans “Re” Orientation
- Added Academic Advisor
- Community Advocate Program
- State Law for Veterans in Higher Ed
- Other
  - Faculty and Staff Outreach
  - Testing
  - Development
  - Media
Questions and Discussion
Thank you!

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How do our findings compare with experiences at your institution?

Considering your own campus context, what additional recommendations would you suggest?

What barriers would you anticipate in enacting new practices?