

Student Veterans: Curricular and Co-Curricular Experiences

Center for the Study of Student Life

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarizes the findings from a study conducted by the Office of Student Life and the Office of Military and Veteran Student Services on the experiences of student veterans. Focus groups were conducted with 24 student veterans in spring 2014, and data were coded into recurring themes, which are presented in this executive summary through exemplar quotes.

ACADEMICS

While some participants struggled to transition back to classroom learning, others found it to be a pleasant experience compared to the military. Learning to work well with both faculty and traditional students was a theme in the focus groups.

Obstacles to success? For me, it was learning how to learn again 'cause there's military learning and then there's academic learning. (FG1, p. 25)

I kinda see [the professor] as the—not really the commander—but it's weird walking right up and asking a question versus, "All right, we'll go through this person, go through this person, go through this person. Maybe then you'll finally get to your professor." It's a little bit of a flippin' in your head to hear that that's okay to do. (FG1, p. 6)

I had zero tolerance for unmotivated 18 year olds. (FG2, p. 3)

ADMINISTRATIVE

Participants report benefiting from the presence of the Office of Military and Veteran Student Services 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. (FG2, p. 39)

BENEFITS

Participants expressed both gratitude for and confusion about Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits.

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.' (FG1, p. 10)

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. I mean, we do a lot [laughter], but we also focus on what actually matters. (FG2, p. 25-26)

INFORMATION SEEKING & NAVIGATING RESOURCES

Participants universally expressed a desire for more information to be provided earlier in their transition period from leaving the military to entering college. Participants also desired this information to be more consolidated so they can more easily access and digest it. Participants requested more information from both the military and Ohio State:

I think the scariest part of transitioning is the time from separating to that first day. (FG1, p. 9)

For me, I was just knocking down every door. . . and asking 'em a million questions, like a 2-year-old: 'Why? Show me.' I think because of that, that's how I found out. (FG1, p. 10)

PEER CONNECTIONS

Participants consistently expressed feeling disconnected from other students, matched by a desire to form connections with peers.

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. (FG1, p. 16)

I've found the majority of students to be good people ... smart (They) understand why they're there. They have a goal. Yes, they're young and maybe ignorant of the world, but it's not their fault. They're just young. I don't hold that against them. (FG2, p. 34)

CO-CURRICULAR ENGAGEMENT

Participants who chose to engage in co-curricular activities often cited forming connections or helping other veterans as their motivation.

Also, too, just with transitioning, getting used to being sociable in a sense of where I thought it would help me with my transition from tryin' to get from military to civilian and actually flowing into college life. (FG1, p. 17)

However, many cited financial, geographic, and scheduling barriers to getting involved on campus.

I've been on a mission to get the high marks. Carryin' that 16, 18 credit hours, I've been kind of focused... . Hopefully, after this semester I can kind of breathe a little bit cuz I'm tryin' to get that foundation to where I can start launching off into being more active. (FG1, p. 18)

Others acknowledged that some student veterans do not identify themselves as such, which complicates efforts to provide services.

Here and at the community college back in [city] I went to, I would keep my mouth shut and try and hide my haircut or something like that. (FG2, p. 18)

FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

The majority of participants indicated that, while their families provided moral support, they did not support the student veterans financially.

When I got deployed, they were the most— they were the only ones that I could count on talking to every single day if I wanted to. (FG4, p. 11-12)

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. (FG2, p. 27)

INTRODUCTION

Veterans are increasingly attending post-secondary institutions because of an expansion in benefits via the Post-9/11 GI Bill. To better understand the experiences of this growing population of student veterans, The Ohio State University designed a qualitative study using focus groups in 2014. This report presents findings related to the curricular and co-curricular experiences of student veterans and suggestions for improvement.

The Ohio State University has had a longstanding commitment to veteran employees and students. In 2011, the University pledged to research and develop a strategic plan to better serve student veterans on campus. As a result, the Office of Military and Veterans Services opened in 2012, and has more than tripled the dedicated university personnel to serve this group with a vision of “Buckeyes serving Buckeyes in order to achieve academic success, graduate, and have better lives.” The office accomplishes this mission by: shepherding the integration of VA & military benefits pay and processes; marshalling resources and strategies to enable academic success; fostering a positive transition to civilian & college life; liaising to internal and external partners, and advising university leadership. The office also partners with a full-time, on-site, Department of Veterans Affairs employee under the VA’s effective Vet Success on Campus program. Within Ohio State, visiting resources like Counseling and Consultation, and collaborations across the university allow student veterans full access to programs & services that benefit their journey to academic success. Finally, the office reviews, advocates, and leads policy and program changes that benefit Ohio State’s Buckeye Military Family.

METHODS

The research team conducted 5 focus groups in spring 2014 with a total of 24 participants. Focus groups one through four were filled using an open enrollment allowing any gender, and focus group five enrolled only females. The number of participants in each group ranged from three to six. In addition to discussion, participants completed a short questionnaire.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Seven participants identified as female, and 17 identified as male. All participants lived off-campus. Five of the participants had children.

Class Rank	N	Relationship Status	N	Co-habitants	N
First year	3	Single	10	Partner/Spouse	8
Second year	3	Married	5	Children	4
Third year	5	Divorced	2	Other family member	3
Fourth year	8	Widowed	0	Friends	8
Graduate	5	In a relationship	7	Alone	5

Branch of Military	N	Military Status	N
Air Force	7	National Guard	5
Army	7	Reserve (IRR or Active)	6
Army National Guard/ Army Reserves	2	Veteran	12
Marines	5	Other	1
Navy	2		
Ohio Air or Army National Guard	2		

Note: one participant selected both Air Force and Army

FINDINGS

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. (FG2, p. 38)

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. (FG3, p. 8)

ACADEMICS

Participants shared a range of experiences regarding their academics at Ohio State. While generally students shared that their current academic experiences at Ohio State are more enjoyable than past college experiences, many participants shared suggestions for improvement.

TRANSITION TO ACADEMICS

Students had varied experiences transitioning to the academic setting. Several participants struggled with the transition. When asked about the college experience so far, one participant replied that it was “Chaos. Constant chaos.” (FG2, p.18); another stated about their transition to class, “I got angry in a lot of in my classes” (FG2, p. 3). For some, the transition to college overlapped with their transition to civilian life. Some participants even defined college as a means to transition from the military to the civilian workforce. For others, who had taken more time between their separation from the military and college enrollment, getting the degree was another step toward future career goals.

Some participants felt that they were behind their classmates academically and as if there were an “uneven playing field” when “trying to keep up with all these guys fresh out of high school” (FG1, p. 11). Participants who felt the need for refresher material were averse to spending their time and tuition benefits on remedial course work, and suggested having no-cost refresher courses, or a bridge program to help transition to required courses.

Obstacles to success? For me it was learning how to learn again 'cause there's military learning and then there's academic learning. (FG1, p. 25)

We have 36 months of GI Bill benefits... . 36 months of GI Bill benefits and then you're done. There is very little support after that... . 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. I mean, we do a lot *[laughter]*, but we also focus on what actually matters. (FG2, p. 25-26)

Make it so people can find it [refresher material] and it's well-publicized, 'cause much like them, yeah, we know the stuff, but we're very rusty when it comes to that kind of stuff. (FG1, p. 14)

While some expressed concern with transitioning to academic life, others felt this was a “soft” experience in contrast to military life, stating “we're not strangers to hard work and busy schedules” (FG2, p. 19).

I still feel like I would take this over basic training any day of the week. (FG1, p. 19)

The job that I had was a lot more high maintenance than this for me, so maybe that's why it's easy. (FG2, p. 19)

I think the classes here are easy. I just laugh when ... people complain. (FG2, p. 19)

Some participants who adapted well during the transition adopted the mentality of treating coursework as similar to a paid position.

I basically treat college like a full-time job 'cause the VA's paying for me to do it right now. (FG1, p. 19)

I can actually sit there, listen, and enjoy it. I have a new level of appreciation ... your focus is more on your studies and learning. (FG2, p. 25)

FACULTY AND INSTRUCTORS

Participants reported a range of experiences with faculty. Participants largely agreed that faculty were "helpful" (FG1, p. 28; FG2, p. 18). Some indicated they approach faculty to reveal their veteran status, and that "they've been real accommodating" (FG2, p. 21). Several participants shared that they were cautious about choosing to reveal their identity as a veteran.

I think a lot of times the professors, even if they do know that a student is a veteran, they're generally smart enough to know that it's probably a sensitive subject, and they're probably a bit uncomfortable asking it, themselves, so they just avoid the topic, as they probably should. (FG2, p. 22)

There are a few professors that I actually get along with very well... other ones that I know that just kinda keep it [status as a veteran] hush-hush to avoid any potential issues. (FG2, p. 16)

Some participants reported that faculty members and instructors are not always responsive (FG3, p. 9). One participant indicated they needed more one-on-one attention from faculty in large lectures (FG5, p. 20).

There's definitely professors that are ... just there to get their research done and that's it, but there's also some really good ones out there... 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'. (FG1, p. 29)

Others were hesitant to engage with faculty. Participants noted that engaging directly with faculty requires a reframing from their training in how to navigate a hierarchy (FG1, p. 6).

I kinda see (the professor) as the—not really the commander—but it's weird walking right up and asking a question versus, "All right, we'll go through this person, go through this person, go through this person. Maybe then you'll finally get to your professor." It's a little bit of a flippin' in your head to hear that that's okay to do. (FG1, p. 6)

Well, the great thing is that in the military, our COs and Sergeant Majors always tell us that we have that open door policy, but your rank is on the line when you walk through that door. Here, we don't have that ranking ... so I think we're braver to walk into the door and talk to anybody, no matter what their position is. We try to respect the chain of

command in the civilian world, but if you're tryin' to get things done, you're not afraid to walk into your office and be like, "This is what I need to accomplish." (FG 1, p. 6)

A common frustration was faculty members assuming that all students in their classes have recently seen pre-requisite material:

I haven't seen this material in God knows how many years. No. I'm not fresh out of high school. Stop tellin' me I am. (FG1, p. 11)

The participants expressed concerns about classroom content and activities. One participant suggested that faculty be educated about veteran students, such as warning students of impending chemistry explosions, to prevent distressing situations (FG5, p. 5). Several other participants found some faculty provide *too* much structure.

I'm like, "No, that's stupid. Why am I gonna do it? Why would I do this? I wanna write this paper this way. I don't need you to give me an outline of every single bullet on like this set has to contain this stuff." ... It's like, like just give me a break. I know how to write. *[Laughter]* It's like if I was failing the classes, I would understand, but it's just like it gets to a point. (FG2, p. 28)

Another participant was offended by the delivery of misleading, stereotyped, outdated content about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) taught in a class. The student veteran, who had expertise in that content area because of experience as a peer counselor in the military, reported he felt compelled to correct the instructor (FG2, p. 20-22). Participants also noted that mandatory attendance in large lectures can be a barrier, especially if they have mental health issues such as PTSD that make being in large crowds stressful (FG5, p. 4).

IN THE CLASSROOM

Regarding their role in the classroom, participants indicated that they don't always share in class, which other students may perceive as "cold and distant," but that they would rather "keep quiet before I upset somebody" (FG 3, pp.15-16).

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. (FG2, p. 28)

Several participants shared that they take leadership roles in class (FG2, p.28-30). This had particular implications for group assignments. Participants reported at times they assumed these roles, and at other occasions were assumed to be the leader because of either their life experience or veteran status. Participants shared that when they take leadership roles in groups they are challenged by team members who are "draggin' their feet" (FG2, p. 3).

You step up ... when there's something to be delegated or something to be done, then you fill that position. (FG2, p. 30)

Being in the environment that we are, it's very hard to try to hold people accountable, because I'm used to holding people accountable in a certain way. (FG2., p. 30)

Many participants indicated group work is challenging, some specifically mentioning issues with civilian students doing their fair share:

I had zero tolerance for unmotivated 18 year olds. (FG2, p. 3)

I don't like it (group work) personally because I like to depend on myself or people that I know and trust. (FG4 p. 16)

Participants noted that student veterans have much experience with teamwork compared to traditional students (FG 3, p. 23). Other student veterans are at times viewed as efficient collaborators compared to other students (FG4, p. 16-17). For a student pursuing a business degree, the additional experience working in teams was viewed as an asset by civilian classmates:

... while we might be a little bit behind academically...the other students come to us because they wanna learn more about our leadership styles.(FG1, p. 4)

Participants across focus groups stated a preference for randomly-assigned groups. Student veterans are sometimes last to be picked (FG4, p. 16). Participants also noted that working with the same group throughout the length of the course is more efficient than forming a new group every time (FG3, p. 20). Faculty could consider pre-assigning group work to balance groups, and alleviate the stress related to exclusion in the process (FG3, p. 20).

ADMINISTRATIVE

Participants were appreciative of the Office for Military and Veterans Services administrators, describing them as very responsive and invested (FG5, pp. 12-13). Participants found it crucial to have an administrator who is aware of the university system and possesses the ability to cut the red tape on their behalf.

Having somebody at the university who had enough clout to be able to actually get things done. That's very, very important. (FG2, p. 5)

Veterans need somebody that can make a decision and that has the authority to make that decision and have it be binding. (FG2, p. 39)

Participants strongly expressed the value of the collaboration between the Veterans Administration (VA) and Ohio State to have a VA staff member on site in the Office for Military and Veteran Student Services to support their transition and persistence; one participant stated it was very helpful "just having somebody that can speak both languages" (FG2, p. 38).

Participants noted that the administrative differences between college and military are not always readily apparent.

The most difficult thing here at Ohio State was there was a difference between VA disability letter and disability services letter here. I did not know that within a year. No one ever told me. (FG4, p. 2)

Some participants noted that access and mobility issues hindered their ability to navigate campus.

I'm supposed to use a walker. I cannot do that on campus. There's too many steps to go around. There's too many side steps. Even right outside the disability services office, I sustained a very bad fall with my walker because of the pavement there. It's never level. (FG4 p. 5)

Some participants had difficulty scheduling during autumn and spring terms because of conflicts with their work commitments, and several noted that they were not able to use their benefits in

the time required because of the time of day courses were offered and the availability of sequenced courses. Some participants suggested an increase in evening courses to ease scheduling (FG3, p. 12). Night classes were also noted as beneficial for those with PTSD because there are fewer crowds (FG5, p. 5). However, a female participant shared that she does not feel safe on campus at night so she would not take night classes (FG5, p. 10).

Participants described difficulties in maintaining a meaningful course load, indicating that they sometimes take courses that are not necessary in order to maintain the desired credit load (FG3, p. 12). For those who chose not to take summer classes, the financial support from the VA stops during these academic breaks and causes hardship (FG3, p. 24).

Some participants expressed concerns about the accuracy of advising information (FG2, p. 40), noting that errors can lead to "draining my GI Bill" (FG1, p. 12). Similarly, they suggested that offering refresher courses, potentially online for free, would significantly aid veterans in both the academic transition and the best use of their GI Bill (FG1, pp. 13-14; FG2, p. 4; FG2, pp. 39-40).

Maybe for advisors to be a bit more aware of that [the availability of online courses] and a bit more vocal about that, especially for nontraditional students. (FG2 p. 43)

I've spoken to my advisor once. I didn't get much out of the experience, and it changes every semester, so I've sorta gone on my own for that one. I don't really see any benefit to sitting in somebody's office to have them put a gold stamp on my next semester's classes. (FG2, p. 7)

BENEFITS

Participants consistently expressed gratitude for the opportunity the GI Bill provides, and provided feedback regarding its implementation and stipulations.

CHALLENGES IN USING GI BILL BENEFITS

I think it's difficult because we have a ticking clock in our head. We have 36 months of GI Bill benefits. (FG2, p. 25)

The participants expressed a variety of experiences in managing their military education benefits. Overall, the participants were grateful because "benefits make education possible" (FG3, pp. 25-26). However, participants cited challenges with using the benefits, some applicable to the VA, and others that could be alleviated by actions at Ohio State.

I think the veterans' office here does a good job of helping people with their GI Bill and stuff. If only the VA would pay the bills on time. (FG1, p. 26)

While participants were appreciative of the late fees being waived by Ohio State, a recurring sentiment was late payments were a "distraction" that caused "unnecessary stress" that affected enrollment and performance during the interim (FG3, p. 6). One participant relayed that seeing the account on hold is "still a shock, even though we should know by now" (FG1, p. 27).

While some participants experienced emotional stress as a result of late payments, others faced academic limitations. One participant shared that when the benefit comes late they cannot afford their books (FG5, p. 5, p19). Overall, participants emphasized that worrying about finances distracts them from academics (FG3, p. 25). Participants also shared other logistical constraints they faced related to benefits. Several participants gave examples of having to choose between receiving a failing grade or having to pay back benefits if they withdrew from a

course. In some instances, the failing grade was due to medical complications resulting from their military services (FG5, Demographic Survey).

There are issues related to using benefits in “series classes” (2 or 3 classes that are to be taken in succession) in semesters where students earn only six credits in one semester; in these cases, the VA only pays half of the tuition. It would be helpful if such circumstances were to count as whole semester credit, to allow students to maintain necessary credit hour minimums and still have the flexibility to drop a class (FG5, p. 13).

Some participants indicated it was hard to support their families with just their benefits, but it was also hard to schedule classes around a job (FG3, p. 12, p. 24). Some participants were affected negatively by changes to Basic Allowance for Housing payment (FG1, p. 27). Parking was described as cost prohibitive and is not covered in the GI Bill (FG5, p. 37).

UNDERSTANDING OF GI BILL AND OTHER VETERAN BENEFITS

Participants expressed varying degrees of understanding of the GI Bill and other veteran benefits, resulting in differing degrees of experience and success (FG1, p. 10, p. 15).

You can get extra money besides your GI bill for this. You can get help with your academics through this. A lot of people that I talked to were like, ‘Really? I didn’t know that.’ (FG1, p. 10)

A lot of things I didn’t know I find out after the fact. I think that’s why I have the personality to do that ‘cause I’m like, ‘I’m not gonna let that happen again,’ especially academics and what entails with the GI Bill. I didn’t know that there’s extra benefits to hang onto the GI Bill. (FG1, p. 10)

Participants also expressed confusion regarding the relationship between military health care benefits and those available to them as a student.

I have health insurance through OSU, but then because of my disability rating, I can also get some health services through the VA, and it’s kind of a confusing disconnect between, well, where do I go for what? (FG2, p. 35)

Participants consistently stated that they learn about benefits from other veterans. During the focus groups, there were several occasions when participants would explain aspects of supplemental benefits available to veterans. While they were grateful to learn of new aspects or intricacies of benefits, participants were frustrated that they had not heard of them earlier.

Well, crap. I just made it through a frickin’ year of Gen Chem’s man. [Laughter] Where were you last year? [Laughter] (FG 2, p. 42)

I’m very mad I didn’t know about that. [Laughter] (FG2, p. 42)

Well, I mean, I don’t know. Maybe if that information were available. (FG2, p. 42)

Participants also reported issues with payment/repayment:

For the GI Bill, I’ve had times in the past where, and this is difficult to remember, they pay it, pay too much and then you have to pay them back. They’ll take it right out of your military pay or in my case Social Security, my disability pay. There were three different instances where I had to withdraw from the semester or quarter at that time and had to pay all of that back at a very, very inconvenient time. Instead of saying, “Okay. You can

start again in the future", it's not like that. It doesn't go on your bill. You have to pay them back 100 percent first (FG4, p. 19).

INFORMATION SEEKING AND NAVIGATING RESOURCES

Participants consistently shared concerns about finding resources, the presentation of information, and learning valuable information after the fact.

SEEKING INFORMATION ON TRANSITION AND LOGISTICS PRIOR TO ARRIVING ON CAMPUS

To aid the transition period, participants indicated that they first need to be provided better information as they exit the military, some citing insufficient time allotted for the Army Career and Alumni Program (ACAP) (FG2, p. 9)

Participants indicated that they would like to have more information from the university throughout the summer or months leading up to coursework. One participant expressed frustration starting as early as the application process, saying "I just didn't know who to go to and couldn't really get any good answers," (FG3, p. 5).

I think the scariest part of transitioning is the time from separating to that first day. (FG1, p. 9)

Between July and August, I had no information from the university... . It was crazy... . In the military you find out things months in advance and ... you'll always have that person that you can go to to ask that question. (FG1, p. 9)

Participants suggested providing one-on-one interviews or meetings between new veterans and Office for Military and Veterans Services staff (FG2, p. 10). Participants suggested a survey be given to incoming students, with items such as "Did you receive your exit training regarding VA benefits?" (FG2, p.11). Such a survey would allow university staff to determine which veterans may need additional information about their benefits.

You don't know what you don't know, especially coming out of the separation programs. (FG2, p. 11)

Also suggested was creating an advising checklist unique to veterans that includes items related to gaining academic credits or refresher courses without taking semester-long classes, such as the Credit by Examination Program (EM). One participant suggested a specific veteran advisor to help guide the process (FG3, p. 30).

Participants indicated that they would benefit from more specific information about how to transition (FG1, p. 24), study skills (FG1, p. 24), required forms and due dates (FG5, pp. 19, 33). Participants specifically highlighted the need for more detailed information about supplemental GI Benefits (FG1, p. 15), scholarships and funds for veterans (FG1, p. 10), and the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) (FG5, p. 8).

Had I known that, or if there was a resource that would've said, 'Hey, just so you know, this class is gonna take all this amount of work and all this amount of your time, so plan your semester out accordingly,' versus, 'Oh, *[expletive]*. Now I have all this work. It's only two credit hours. I have this class. This is only worth a little bit and this is worth a lot.' Just that whole juggling act of—had I known prior to comin' to OSU that that's what my classes would've looked like, that would've helped immensely. (FG1, p. 18-19)

LEARNING HOW TO NAVIGATE RESOURCES

Participants expressed a range of experiences, as well as personal aptitude, in finding assistance and resources on campus. Some indicated that trying to find information during the semester distracts from class (FG1, p. 11).

I didn't need medical insurance, but I didn't know how to navigate the system on the Web because I was never trained to do that as a student that's been out since 1985. (FG4, p. 4)

While some participants indicated they did not know where to turn for help, stating “a lot of us are lost” (FG1, p. 11), others hesitated to bother staff but ultimately indicated that it was up to them to seek the help they need (FG1, p. 10).

For me, I was just knocking down every door— the finance department, the VA department— and asking 'em a million questions, like a 2-year-old: ‘Why? Show me.’ I think because of that, that's how I found out. (FG1, p. 10)

Some participants navigated resources entirely on their own by “trial and error,” relying on public resources and trying to “find out for myself,” (FG3, p. 3). Others relied on peer mentors (FG1, p. 8) or veteran ambassadors from their programs (FG1, p. 8, p. 13). Regardless, participants indicated that it was beneficial to have someone to go to and ask questions (FG1, p. 9).

PEER CONNECTIONS

Many participants discussed the ways in which they connected with other students. A prominent topic throughout the focus groups was the relationship between student veterans and their civilian, traditional-aged peers. While it was common for participants to discuss feeling frustrated or ignored by the broader population, they were often forgiving of traditional students who they perceived to lack maturity and/or life experience. Peer relationships among student veterans were highly valued, as participants felt freer to be themselves and were able to obtain useful information and support.

FEELING A DISCONNECT FROM OTHER STUDENTS

The participants expressed various experiences when forming peer connections. One barrier to connecting to others on campus was a feeling of separation from the student population, represented by one participant saying “we’re outliers” (FG1, p. 11). Some participants indicated that an age distinction played an important role:

I’m ten years older than people here. (FG3, p. 12)

It’s definitely a lot harder because they look at you and they’re like, ‘Wow, you’re old.’ (FG2, p33)

Some participants thought that the distinction between themselves and other students was related to their status as nontraditional students, explaining,

There’s a giant disconnect with commonalities of the traditional college students to the non-ones. (FG2, p. 32)

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. (FG2, pp. 31-32)

The distance they felt from classmates can also relate to their sense of having had more life experience:

They've just gone straight through college and don't have lots of world experience. That's just really hard to relate to. (FG2, p. 32)

Relatedly, participants sometimes had unpleasant classroom experiences because of civilian commentary:

Lots of civilians had opinions about what was going on in Iraq. That was right after the [laughter] height of the violence. They liked to share that in class, not thinking that what they're saying was not entirely always accurate and not thinking that there could be veterans around ... being very inconsiderate. [Laughter] I didn't always react well to that, but got better. (FG2, p. 3)

Some participants indicated that their perspectives regarding the importance of academics varied from that of their civilian classmates, noting that many have a "lack of responsibility" and are "taking it for granted" (FG1, p. 4). In contrast, many reflected that they, at some point in their lives, were similar to traditional students, and that many traditional students are as goal-oriented as they are:

I've found the majority of students to be good people... smart... [They] understand why they're here. They have a goal. Yes, they're young and may be ignorant of the world, but it's not their fault. They're just young. I don't hold that against them. (FG2, p. 34)

For several participants, differences in program of study seemed to inform a difference in feelings of connection to their classmates. Participants in graduate programs feel closer in age to their classmates and feel that they "don't stick out" (FG1, p12). In addition, participants in graduate programs benefited from college-specific student veteran organizations to which participants felt connected. One participant indicated his graduate program had a class Facebook page that sought out others to make sure they had someone to connect with to ask questions (FG1, p. 6), and that was "really helpful" for finding information, and a "crucial resource to actually get through the transition," (p. 7).

Another barrier to connecting that participants discussed was the use of alcohol in socializing. Participants who chose not to drink alcohol expressed having a harder time socializing, or finding opportunities to socialize (FG1, pp. 31-32),

Bein' in a barracks while serving, you kind of get it out of your system. Everything that they're experiencing now, we experienced it without any pressure of grades. (FG1, p. 22)

People going out, drinking, partying or whatever. I'd like to do that sometimes too, but anymore I can't do it as much as I used to. There was a time when I did it 'cause it's you're washing away bad memories and things. Some of these kids are doing it just for the sake of having something to do. You can struggle to relate a lot. (FG3, p. 14-15)

Finally, many participants mentioned the influence of mandated social activities in the service. Several participants felt that "mandatory fun" in service left "bad habits" (FG3, p. 7). While participants expressed disliking mandatory fun, many said that it works to help form connections (FG3, p. 28).

DESIRING CONNECTIONS TO OTHER STUDENTS

While some participants indicated they don't need social rapport (FG2, p. 31), many others noted a desire to find connections on campus:

I know how it feels to kind of feel just alone... I guess alienated from the body, the student body... Yeah, I kind of feel like 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. (FG1, p. 16)

Other participants expressed that connections are available, but require intentionality:

If you want someone who's actually intelligent that talks to you or has like a sense of maturity that's a lot closer to yours, you can always find people. It's just you have to work a little bit harder at it. (FG2, p. 33).

Many found that being involved in activities and groups on campus was a way to find connections (FG1, p. 17). In addition, connections to other student veterans in particular were desired:

I think one of the advantages of having a fraternity or sorority or whatever for vets is that we know where one another has been. It's not based on rank. It's just based on a trust issue. I would trust these guys with my life and I don't even know them. That's difficult to do with just a regular student. (FG4, p. 7)

CO-CURRICULAR ENGAGEMENT

The participants represented a broad range of co-curricular involvement. Because many student veterans have additional responsibilities outside of school, involvement is often determined by available time for participation. Furthermore, many participants viewed the majority of involvement opportunities on campus as being irrelevant to them as nontraditional students. Nonetheless, some student veterans spoke highly of co-curricular experiences, particularly opportunities tied to their majors or academic programs, groups targeted specifically at veterans, and opportunities to help others.

REASONS FOR BEING INVOLVED

As mentioned in the previous section, a major reason for becoming involved in activities on campus was to find connections to peers and support networks (FG1, p. 16-17). One participant who was recruited to participate in a college-specific veteran organization described the positive effect of engagement:

Before I started, the president I met last year invited everyone over to his house for a barbeque, 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. (FG2, p. 4)

Other participants indicated that they were involved because they wanted to help others, especially student veterans. One participant gave tours to veterans interested in his academic program saying,

I'll do like a one-on-one tour with them, ask 'em if they have any specific questions that maybe I might be able to answer where somebody else might not... I like helpin' people out, so that's why I do it. (FG1, p.17)

Another participant described being engaged in speaking on campus with and about veteran students, and being engaged in tutoring student veterans (FG4, p. 6).

Involvement in organizations and activities was also seen as beneficial to their futures:

It looks good on a resume. (FG1, p. 17)

The intent is to graduate and get a job. You come together. You build, you expand a network. ... All the sudden you just made a great contact that even it might not be even immediately after graduation, but down the road. (FG3, p. 29)

REASONS FOR NOT BEING INVOLVED

Participants had a variety of reasons for not being involved. Regarding not relating to the general student population, one participant noted there aren't many "suitable organizations of peers," and organizations are "geared more towards the traditional student" (FG3, p. 6). Other participants also expressed not feeling interested in organizations:

I am not really involved with really any extracurricular here at Ohio State. That's just by choice... I have not seeked out those opportunities. ... There's no real reason I can formulate right now. I just haven't. I don't see myself into that organizations and stuff. (FG4, p. 6)

I kinda have grown up hobbies that aren't necessarily palling around with 18, 19 year olds that are super stoked about stuff. (FG2, p. 13)

Participants had mixed feelings regarding the Vets 4 Vets organization, an OSU student organization comprised of student veterans that provides both camaraderie and useful information to members and other student veterans. While many enjoyed having the opportunity to connect with other student veterans, some felt that it seems to be more focused on younger student veterans (FG3, p. 7). Other participants noted that the meetings don't fit in their schedule, and that the meetings could be improved by the addition of activities (FG5, pp. 15, 17).

For those considering participation, many cited various time constraints that prevented their involvement, including family responsibilities, employment, and focusing on academic success. One participant indicated that trying to be involved can be overwhelming when the focus is on obtaining a degree (FG5, p. 15). Another participant cited a lack of motivation to meet people during her limited free time (FG5, p. 27). Two participants particularly mentioned the time spent in rehabilitation from a military injury as a barrier to involvement (FG1, p. 18; FG2, p. 2).

INTEREST IN MORE STUDENT VETERAN EVENTS

Participants repeatedly requested that more veteran events be offered by Ohio State. Many explained the desire in terms of wanting to help student veterans get involved with each other to form a "sense of belonging" and a "support system" because they share similar experiences (FG3, pp. 27-29). Participants also indicated it was easier to be themselves around other veterans (FG3, p.15).

Suggestions for events included a range of event types and certain restrictions. One popular suggestion was for free tickets to games where student veterans could sit in the same section or to hold tailgating events for veterans (FG1, p. 22; FG3, p. 7). Participants suggested events involving physical activities, such as fitness classes, but noted a need to include non-active

options for injured student veterans (FG5, p. 18; FG3, p. 7). Participants also requested more events involving children and families (FG3, p. 7; FG5, p. 23).

Important caveats were mentioned regarding events. In response to the feeling that the timing and location of events was difficult, participants suggested more events be held outside of Ohio State (FG5, p. 23). Participants were in need of more opportunities to connect that did not involve alcohol (FG5, p. 23). Another key point was that these events should be well advertised so that more student veterans would hear about them and attend (FG5, p. 15).

SELF-IDENTIFYING AS STUDENT VETERANS

Some participants preferred to not disclose their status as a student veteran because they “don’t like talking about experiences”, and the “18, 19-year-old population... asks stupid questions” (FG2, p. 14). Participants shared:

Here and at the community college back in [city] I went to, I would keep my mouth shut and try and hide my haircut or something like that. (FG2, p. 18)

They [civilian students] think you’re either a war hero, mentally disturbed, or both. (FG2, p. 16).

Even when not specifically abstaining from self-identifying as a veteran, many expressed holding back in interactions to try to be more open and patient, one participant noting “we weren’t trained to have patience” (FG1, p. 5).

I’m in big, lecture hall classes and there’s just no need to open up my life to anyone for any reason. If somebody asks me why I’m so old and only here in my second year, I’ll tell ‘em, but it’s not something I generally talk about. It’s none of people’s [*expletive*] business. (FG2, p. 18)

FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

The participants disclosed a range of family involvement. Many student veterans rely on family for moral and emotional support, but not financial assistance. Generally, student veterans’ families are involved in their pursuit of higher education, but are loosely connected to the campus itself. They are often behind the scenes and may not relate to student veterans’ academic experiences (FG2, pp. 26-27). The participants defined family in different ways; for some, family was primarily their parents. Others had spouses and children, and some considered their pets their family (FG1, p. 20-21).

MORAL SUPPORT AND ENCOURAGEMENT

Some students were motivated by their families to pursue college in the first place:

I had a severe case of PTSD. My brain injury, I couldn’t remember anything so I just sucked. It was terrible. I couldn’t do anything. My mother says, “Get your butt back into school.” (FG4, p. 12)

Many student veterans reported receiving moral support and encouragement from their families, both during service and in college.

My parents just say- they actually support me a lot... College, they both went to college, but they didn’t graduate, so they wanna see me just be better than whatever they did, or

just be successful in whatever I'm seeking. That's their way of supporting me. (FG2, p. 27)

When I got deployed, they were the most- they were the only ones that I could count on talking to every single day if I wanted to. (FG4, p. 12)

LOGISTICAL AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Most participants made the distinction that they did not receive direct financial support from their families. One student noted, "Kids with rich parents don't become veterans in college" (FG2, p. 27).

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. (FG2, p. 27)

A lotta support from the family. You get a lotta college kids going home to mom and dad asking them for financial help. I haven't had to experience that just 'cause of the military. (FG4, p. 12)

One participant, a single mother, indicated that her family provides childcare to support her efforts and allow her to attend.

My parents are very, very helpful. My family places a high value on education, so they are all for this... I mean, if it wasn't for them, my education wouldn't be possible now 'cause I have a four year old and what are you gonna do? (FG2, p. 26)

A male student discussed the challenges associated with managing a household, working, and commuting a significant distance to campus.

I'm up at 5:15 and, like I said, I've got four kids so I get my youngest two up and deal with them in the morning. My wife helps me out there. She understands. She'll pick up any slack. I've gotta drop them off and get over here by 8:00. Again, it's a 40 mile drive... . 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. (FG3, p. 10)

Although most of the participants noted they didn't receive direct financial help from family, some had the comfort of knowing they could ask for help if need be.

I feel like they won't let me go hungry or homeless. I worry about those things a little bit [because] I don't wanna be a burden on anybody, but I know that somebody would step up if it had to be done for sure... . It's a good support system morally and I guess financially if all else fails. (FG3, p. 10-11)

ROLE ADJUSTMENTS

Students returning from deployment and enrolling in college may struggle to meet their families' expectations. One participant discussed the difficulty associated with making weekly plans to see his parents:

Sometimes people don't quite understand when it's your family, but it can be hard for them to realize that, yeah he is home and close this time, but he's got work to do now. As opposed to when it was in the past, if I'm home for something you're on leave or pass for the weekend, all you're doing is staying around with family. (FG3, p. 11)

SUGGESTIONS

The data presented above were collected in spring 2014. Since that time, many of the recommendations that seemingly emerged from the data have been addressed and we have noted progress toward the recommendations.

ACADEMICS

The suggestions below are designed to help student veterans adjust to and excel in the academic environment.

- The institution could explore offering student veterans priority enrollment to ensure they are able to stay on pace to complete their degree in the 36 months covered by the Post-9/11 GI Bill.
 - *Complete: Instituted as of 12/31/14 per Ohio Law beginning with summer term enrollment process in 2/15.*
- The institution should ensure incoming student veterans have information regarding how to test out of classes through EM, Credit by Examination. This would allow them to focus GI Bill benefits on more major-specific courses.
 - *IP: Now incorporated in Peer-Peer engagement program and orientation, and seeking other opportunities to integrate into practice.*
- Khan Academy, or other online learning platforms, could be shared as a resource to help them brush up on academic content, and potentially save them from using their GI Bill funding on remedial coursework.
- Instructors/Faculty/Graduate Teaching Assistants could consider pre-assigning students to groups when requiring group work.
- Instructors/Faculty/Graduate Teaching Assistants could consider special accommodations for lecture attendance.

ADMINISTRATIVE, BENEFITS, AND SHARING INFORMATION

The suggestions below are designed to allow student veterans to take full advantage of their benefits and the resources available at Ohio State.

- Incoming students should be offered the information they need, via consolidated sources, in brief formats:
 - One-on-one (optional) meetings between incoming student veterans and university staff should be provided, covering orientation, transition, testing-out, billing, and other information.
 - *Complete: students using benefits are required to visit OMVS.*
 - *New: Peer-Peer Engagement program initiated January 2015*
 - *Only students who do not use benefits, register with OMVS, or self-identify as a veteran are not delivered this information.*
 - Offer optional early one-on-one meetings with a representative of the Office of Military and Veterans Services to describe services and resources.
 - *Complete—students can see OMVS staff at any point before application through graduation, both on the phone and in-person.*
 - An “Incoming Student Veteran Checklist” could be created to steer student veterans to complete necessary and supplementary administrative tasks. Hosting this on Carmen may make this more accessible to the students.
 - *Complete: part of Peer-Peer program*

- *IP: OMVS will add the existing list to Carmen*
 - Consider making orientation mandatory, offering multiple sessions at differing times of the calendar (e.g., summer, beginning of term), and providing corresponding information online.
 - Incoming students could be required to attend a brief session with upper class student veterans for both Q&A and sharing of tips and resources.
 - A resource to orient student veterans on navigating the Ohio State website could be provided.
- The institution could provide clearer explanations regarding health care options to this population, including distinctions between using the VA and using Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits to access student health services on campus.
 - *Complete: Incorporated in peer-peer program prior to arrival, during registration, and in orientation.*
- There could be more support and scholarships for student veterans who are working.
- More resources could be devoted to marketing to and encouraging relevant administrative staff and faculty to view the *Veterans on Campus* online simulation to train them in effective techniques to engage and refer student veterans (<http://veterans.osu.edu/faculty-and-staff/veterans-on-campus-training/>).
- The institution could provide increased funding to the Office of Military and Veteran Student Services to hire more positions that will make this office a “one-stop-shop” for student veterans.
 - *Since the time focus groups were conducted, OMVS has added a Full-time Academic Advisor who is also a qualified benefits certifier, expanded core staff’s access to Financial Aid and other data to increase service to students. OMVS has also renewed their agreement with the VA to keep a full-time VA employee on site, added a visiting VA counselor once a week, and continued a visiting OSU Counseling and Consultation member to our office.*

PEER CONNECTIONS & CO-CURRICULAR ENGAGEMENT

The following suggestions are designed to foster opportunities for student veterans to connect with each other and engage with additional opportunities on campus.

- Colleges and administrative units could offer more student veteran events at a variety of locations and times to better meet their availability.
 - *Some colleges, such as the College of Social Work, Moritz College of Law, and Fisher College of Business are models of such practices*
 - *IP: the Veteran Advocate program will expand opportunities as the program grows*
- Offices and programs could offer opportunities for veterans to lead subgroups or interest groups.
 - *Currently, College of Social Work is a model for this practice.*
- All departments offering programs to veterans should consider offering childcare concurrent with student veteran events to enhance their ability to participate, or consider providing more events that encourage family participation.
- Opportunities should be created for involved student veterans to connect with incoming veteran students regarding specific involvement and organization opportunities. It is important to consider unique methods of reaching out to student veterans to allow them opportunities to connect.
 - *IP: Currently available through veteran orientation and Peer-Peer program, and working to integrate beyond these*

- Where applicable, provide teambuilding or other activities with traditional students to encourage understanding and improved relationships.
- Departments and academic units should provide resources for traditional/civilian students to foster understanding of the student veteran experience. For example, student organizations could be provided information on nontraditional student needs during existing organization training sessions.

OUTREACH TO FAMILIES

The suggestions below are designed to better connect student veterans' families to their academic experience.

- Family members could be given information about services provided to students by The Ohio State University. Specifically, family members could be made aware of counseling services available to students.
 - *At this time, those family members who self-identify or attend orientation receive these resources*
- Hosting more family-friendly events could provide the opportunity to introduce family members to campus and supply useful information and resources.
 - *Currently host an appreciation dinner, and a Fall social for veterans, military, and family members annually*
- Administrators beyond OMVS should keep in mind that “family” includes parents, spouses/partners, and children. Administrators should consider events that welcome all family members.
- The institution could conduct a needs assessment of childcare services unique to this population.