Veterans Voices: Veteran Success in Higher Education

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**Abstract**

Veteran students’ experiences within higher education are different from their nonveteran peers’ experiences. Veterans enter institutions with experiences that are unique to their military background. This research study provides insight into the experiences of veteran students at a Midwestern religiously affiliated campus. The research question that was examined is, what resources assist veterans to be successful in higher education. In regards to veterans experiences, the research identifies their interpretations of their experiences in college, their needs within higher education, and their suggestions for change. This study revealed what veterans attribute to their success and what they believe would help them in being successful.

**Methods**

The purpose of this research study was to explore and increase understanding of the experiences of veteran students in higher education. The exact number of veterans on campus is not known, due to the fact that students are not asked to disclose this information when applying or registering. These students represent all of the four major branches; Air Force, Marines, Army, and Navy. The questions used in the focus groups or interviews are blended from the interview questions of Zinger & Cohen (2010), and DiRamo, Ackerman, & Mitchell (2008). Both interviews and focus groups were used in the data collection. Focus groups and interviews were recorded, then transcribed and coded. Through data analysis, relevant themes emerged revealing the depth of veteran experiences on campus.

**Findings**

**Challenges**

- “It’s tougher to fit in with people who don’t understand the lifestyle. When you come to college you don’t fit in, you kind of miss out on that experience.” -James
- “Missing your family and friends, not being able to have a ‘normal’ life. Facing life and death situations at 18 or 19.” -James
- “I would say the military is the biggest influence on who I am today. The military has done a lot to shape who I am today, they took a poor underperforming student who didn’t have a care about anything and taught me discipline and respect and duty and courtesy and really changed who I am for the better and I’m definitely thankful for it.” -E
- “I have not had a professor yet that has given me a hard time about it...I feel that a lot of professors capitalize on it in class discussion when they can.” –James
- “The training, the culture, the comrades you don’t really experience as much on the civilian side. That’s the part you miss. It’s a way of life. Its that calling, that higher purpose part, the feeling of defending your country.” –Grace

**Positives**

- “Your training, the military service helped me through college, because it shaped me to be a very regimented and disciplined person.” -E
- “I think the military service helped me through college, because it shaped me to be a very regimented and disciplined person.” -E
- “The training, the culture, the comrades you don’t really experience as much on the civilian side. That’s the part you miss. It’s a way of life. Its that calling, that higher purpose part, the feeling of defending your country.” –Grace
- “I don’t have a problem giving them a hard time about it...I feel that a lot of professors capitalize on it in class discussion when they can.” –James

**Military Culture**

- “I felt like there was no one I could reach out to...There was no outreach, I had no one to go to when it came to classes, getting adjusted, my hearing disability, I felt pretty lost.” -James
- “The hardest thing about being a veteran is dealing with the VA, so anything the university can do to assist veterans in dealing with the VA is going to make everybody happy.” -E
- “I have not had a professor yet that has given me a hard time about it...I feel that a lot of professors capitalize on it in class discussion when they can.” –James

**Suggestions for Change**

- “It’s tougher to fit in with people who don’t understand the lifestyle. When you come to college you don’t fit in, you kind of miss out on that experience.” -James
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**Participant Demographics**

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<td></td>
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**Recommendations**

Each institution should find ways to ask veterans what can we do as an institution to help them. This will help the study institution in better serving veteran student needs. Although the information is not generalizable to every institution and its population of veteran students, the first step for institutions is to identify veteran students at the time of admission through a self reporting tool. Moreover, veteran offices should be created to help increase the sense of community among veterans as well as establishing a venue for communication with the administrators at the institutions.

**Limitations**

- The low number of participants. This made it difficult to conduct effective focus groups, which is why most were done as interviews.
- Only about half of participants had combat experience, making their responses different from their peers who had not experienced combat.
- The findings may have been stronger if more undergraduate and younger participants were interviewed.
- Not knowing the exact number of veteran students on campus was also a limitation in the research.

**Acknowledgements**

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