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Experiences of Veterans Transitioning to Postsecondary Education

PUBLICATION

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ABSTRACT

“An increasing number of U.S. military veterans are entering postsecondary education with problems attributed to deployed military service. The primary objective of this research was to describe the lived experiences of student veterans transitioning from active military service to postsecondary education. Phenomenological interviews were performed with 12 student veterans who had transitioned from military deployment to postsecondary education. An overall essential meaning of “emerging in college culture” was manifested from three themes, supported by rich textural and structural descriptions of student veterans’ experiences: (1) repurposing military experiences for life as a student veteran, (2) reconstructing civilian identity, and (3) navigating postsecondary context and interactions. These findings highlight implications that may facilitate occupational therapists’ efforts in supporting the needs of student veterans.”

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- More than 500,000 veterans are currently enrolled in postsecondary education (PSE), with more expected to enter as active duty deployment is scaled back. Since many veterans report difficulty transitioning to both civilian life and PSE, through 13 interviews with veterans, the authors aimed to better understand common issues returning veterans entering PSE face.
- Three major challenges to a successful transition to PSE were identified: (1) repurposing their military experience, (2) reconstructing their civilian identity, and (3) navigating PSE. Student veterans sought to re-establish their familiarity of military accountability and discipline and believed that linking up with fellow student veterans and groups assisted them in a successful transition. Additionally, some veterans had difficulty adapting to PSE social norms, were uncomfortable in social interactions, and had difficulty relating to traditional students.
- For many veterans, PSE was not a primary goal after their military service. Many decided to pursue PSE because it was available to them through the post-9/11 G.I. Bill. Given this finding, it might be beneficial to discuss postsecondary education opportunities with transitioning service members earlier.



IMPLICATIONS

FOR PRACTICE

Veterans enrolled in postsecondary education (PSE) should continue utilizing services available to them both on campus and off campus. Veterans experiencing difficulty with their transition to PSE should consider speaking with an academic or career advisor or an occupational therapist. Advisors or occupational therapists serving veterans should help veteran learn how to effectively manage the difficulties associated with transitioning to PSE. To better understand the unique qualities and challenges veterans face during their transition, it might be beneficial for occupational therapists to collaborate with postsecondary educators. Given that veterans consistently identify reconstructing their identity and relating to peers as major challenge areas, institutions of higher education (IHE) serving veterans should continue offering resources to help veterans connect with other student veterans and non-veteran students, such as a veteran's resource center (VRC).

FOR POLICY

Given that some veterans reported that the abrupt switch from military to civilian life contributed to transition difficulties, the Department of Defense (DoD) might offer additional resources to transitioning service members to help smooth the process. The DoD might use these findings to further improve its transition resources, including Transition GPS. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) might continue supporting veteran education, through its many benefits, including the Yellow Ribbon Program. The DoD might expand programs to assist veterans in understanding how to repurpose their military skills to PSE and the civilian workforce. Given that some veterans reported difficulty adjusting to their new identity, the DoD and the VA might continue offering resources on transitioning and identity. To help veterans adjust to postsecondary education, policymakers might consider allocating additional funds to VRCs on university campuses. Since many veterans did not initially plan to enter PSE, the DoD might continue offering information on PSE opportunities, and offer additional information on PSE before a service member's transition.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Further research is needed to better understand the needs of transitioning veterans, especially regarding the unique challenges they face when pursuing PSE. A limitation of this study is that all 13 participants were from the same university. Future studies on needs of student veterans in higher education should sample veterans from other universities. Researchers should also interview veterans attending IHE that lack veteran resources. Interviewing student veterans across many different types of IHE could provide insight into the needs of veterans while also increasing generalizability. Another limitation of this study is that a majority of the veterans were Caucasian. Future researchers studying the needs and experiences of veterans pursuing PSE should include a more racially and ethnically representative sample. Future research should also study needs of veteran students by gender, culture, disability status, education status, and type of school. Studying these demographic factors in more detail could provide a more accurate scope and complexity of challenges veterans transitioning to PSE face. Future researchers should examine if there are gaps between military culture and campus culture, and how these gaps can be bridged. Further research should explore how interactions between student veterans impact a student veteran's transition experience.

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