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Student Veterans in Transition: Re-enrolling after War Zone Deployments

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KEYWORDS: Student veterans, war zone deployments, higher education, re-enrolling

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS:

- This study examines the individual-level transitions encountered by student veterans (National Guard and Reserve members) as they re-enroll in college post deployment, attempting to account for the complexities of student and veteran identities. During semi-structured interviews, respondents discussed four major themes: role incongruities, maturity, relationships and identity re-negotiation.
- Student veterans indicated that deployment experiences increased their maturity level and often drove them to excel in school and complete their degree, especially after having known others who were killed in combat.
- While many student veterans voiced challenges to resuming collegiate friendships, including limited conversations surrounding deployment and military experiences, the majority of respondents defined their re-enrollment in a university as a positive and necessary transition.

AUTHORS: Corey B. Rumann, Ph.D.; Florence A. Hamrick, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT:

“United States National Guard and Reserve units—including their college student members—increasingly are deployed, resulting in students’ abrupt withdrawals from college and subsequent re-enrollments after their return. This study explored student veterans’ transitions from deployment back to their prior status as full-time college students at one research extensive university.”



Implications

FOR PRACTICE

Service members who are re-enrolling in college at the undergraduate level should seek out support groups for student veterans. Student veterans should be aware of potential barriers to re-enrolling, including financial and physical or mental challenges in adjusting to university life. While it is important to be aware of the challenges, student veterans have reported that having an overall positive and optimistic outlook helped them to cope with college life. Family members and friends of service members re-enrolling in college should realize that going back to college is a transition, and help their student veteran succeed by offering encouragement and emotional support. Most universities have focused attention on ensuring that veterans understand their available benefits, which is a significant step forward; however, universities should also implement support services for veterans in the form of student veteran organizations and support groups. Mentorship programs between incoming student veterans and more experienced student veteran peers can also help with veterans' adjustment to college life and the difference in daily activities. Many of the student veterans in this study expressed a strong desire for advancement, and viewed continuing college as a means to their future success.

FOR POLICY

Some of the stressors encountered by student veterans who re-enroll in college stem from problems with GI Bill funding being received on time. Policy makers might consider exploring ways to expedite federal funding to student veterans. Offering additional funding to student veterans would assist many who are struggling with the transition back to university life, as well. Universities might consider forming partnerships with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to create committees that specifically address the issues student veterans encounter when re-enrolling and transitioning from military life to college life. Policy makers may also wish to work toward the establishment of student veteran resource centers at more colleges and universities, as well as provide the funding and oversight to ensure these resource centers are staffed appropriately, and can offer quality support across the board.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future studies should include a greater variety of student veterans in their samples to ensure there is feedback from service members in all branches. Future studies should also utilize larger sample sizes that include more women veterans, as well as pursue the quantitative analyses needed for this area of research. Further, none of the respondents reported seeking help for, or receiving an official diagnoses of, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) despite exhibiting symptoms, so future studies should examine the role of PTSD on student veterans' re-enrollment experiences. Future studies should also perform longitudinal research that examines the links between low family income, joining the military, college re-enrollment and career outcomes, as all respondents in this sample reported coming from non-affluent backgrounds and viewed both military service and attending college as necessary to their success. Longitudinal studies should focus on both long-term and short-term effects of re-enrolling on student veterans' career outcomes. Studies are also needed on the effectiveness of support programs for returning student veterans.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Corey B. Rumann, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Practice
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
crumann2@unl.edu

Florence A. Hamrick, Ph.D.
Iowa State University