Professional Development:
The International Journal of
Continuing Social Work Education

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Journal:	Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education
Article Title:	*Challenges Facing Student Veterans at Postsecondary Institutions and Interventions for Winning the Academic Battle*
Author(s):	*Selber and Shaffer*
Volume and Issue Number:	*Vol.26 No.1*
Manuscript ID:	*261019*
Page Number:	*19*
Year:	*2023*

Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is published two times a year (Spring and Winter) by the Center for Social and Behavioral Research at 1923 San Jacinto, D3500 Austin, TX 78712. Our website at www.profdevjournal.org contains additional information regarding submission of publications and subscriptions.

ISSN: 1097-4911

URL: www.profdevjournal.org **Email: www.profdevjournal.org/contact**

Challenges Facing Student Veterans at Postsecondary Institutions and Interventions for Winning the Academic Battle

Selber and Shaffer

Introduction

College enrollment has increased since the passage of the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill and has resulted in a record number of veterans using this important benefit. Overall enrollment in higher education increased by about 3% as over 2.1 million beneficiaries accessed their earned benefits as more than $75 billion in educational benefits were used as of 2017. (Institute for Veterans and Military Families [IVMF], 2017). The number of veterans entering higher education has continued to rise as the Next Greatest Generation of veterans accesses hard-fought-for educational benefits. They bring with them a generous new GI Bill, an uncommon degree of maturity, and the type of real-world experience that can provide insight and depth to a classroom setting. Unfortunately, too many of these same veterans are still finding academic success difficult to obtain. In the closing months of 2012, a report emerged claiming 88% of student veterans were dropping out within their first academic year and only 3% were actually graduating (Sander, 2012), leading some to question the value of the economic investment being made on veterans. The veracity of this figure was immediately questioned by veteran organizations, noting that the figure came from a mistaken interpretation of a report pertaining to a single state (Shane, 2013). However, the uncomfortable question had nevertheless been raised: Are student veterans graduating from postsecondary institutions at a disproportionately low rate? The report on graduation rates published in 2014 by Student Veterans of America (SVA) refuted that perception and painted a different picture, revealing that graduation rates were actually better among veterans than nonveteran counterparts (Cate et al., 2017). Studies have reported rates of veteran graduation that vary in range from 26.6% to 68% (Cate et al., 2017). Also, there remains little evidence on the evaluation of what works to help veterans succeed (Selber, 2014). In addition, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has yet to keep detailed national data of veteran graduation rates for universities, grade point averages, or post-academic career success, leading to speculation and widely varying accounts regarding the actual figures (Sander, 2012; Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021). Research continues to suggest that a large number of student veterans are disproportionately struggling to complete their education (Ryan et al., 2011; Cunningham, 2012; Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021), raising the question—what more can we do to support their graduation?

A commonly cited explanation for why current veterans have difficulty in postsecondary education is that they struggle to make the initial transition from soldier to student (Ackerman et al., 2009; Ryan et al., 2011). In this paper, the authors examine some of the diverse challenges student veterans face in making this dramatic transition and provide suggestions for postsecondary institutions to improve the likelihood of their success. The recommendations proposed in this paper are already in place at some institutions to varying degrees. Through targeted interventions, we can help ensure veterans are more likely to successfully adapt to their new social role, find a supportive environment on campus, and have an increased probability of academic success.

Background

To respond to these challenges, a four-year public university in the southwest provided leadership in the development of the Veterans Initiative, a coordinated approach to campus services for student veterans. The campus has an enrollment of over 38,000 students and is located in a corridor with multiple military installations nearby. The university has a strong foundation for supporting the military with two long-standing ROTC units on campus that commission a large number of officers for the Air Force and Army. With a population of over 1700 student veterans and 1900 dependents, the campus boasts one of the higher enrollments of full-time student veterans and dependents among four-year universities in the country.

In 2008 a Veterans Advisory Council of facul-

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ty and staff from key departments on campus was formed to identify and develop services to address the needs of the increasing number of student veterans on campus. With the formation of this advisory body, which has continued to meet monthly since its inception, the university began to develop a model for serving student veterans on campus and to use this as an opportunity to educate social work students who increasingly reported interest in working with the veteran population. This dual mission to serve student veterans and educate social work students for practice with veterans has become a blended and seamless mission. This model that blends the program development and service needs of the Veterans Initiative on campus with the educational and practice needs of the students enrolled in the bachelors and master's degree programs has resulted in a unique, best-practices model for supporting the student veterans and military dependents on the university campus and the education of social work students and future veteran service providers (Selber et al., 2014). The model has five main tenets: a transitional, coordinated approach utilizing a Veterans Advisory Council with strong on-campus unit participation; a peer-to-peer led initiative that involves veterans in policy, program development, and service roll out; the involvement of partnerships inside and outside the university for service innovation; a reliance on data from needs assessments of the student veteran population to drive program development; and the blending of the educational mission of the university and commitment to service delivery.

Theoretical Frameworks

At the program level the theoretical framework relies on Scholssberg's transitional role theory (1981). The theory outlines a series of phases: leaving the military, transitioning into the university, moving through the university, graduating and moving into a civilian career. The phases focus on the potential challenges veterans encounter dealing with changes in roles, environment, and networks of support and relationships. These changes also bring changes in veterans' perceptions of self and their stories. In addition, DiRamio & Spires (2009) elaborated that the phases give an emphasis to how military service influences all the phases that follow and gives meaning to their developing new stories and views of the world.

At the individual level veterans are viewed within a holistic, ecological framework which embraces understanding elements beyond the veteran's military background including social, academic, financial, family/social, health, behavioral health, and legal elements as well as the ways these are shaped by the environment the veteran interfaces with, namely the university environment.

James: A Student Veteran Case Study

Seated in the back row, James looks up and scans the classroom from left to right, then ceiling to floor. He looks back down at his test. James feels like he should know the answer to the question, but the answer doesn't seem to come. While circling an answer on his test, the young girl seated next to him stands up quickly, causing her chair to squeak loudly. Startled, James grimaces and shoots an instinctively harsh glare. She whispers, "Sorry," giving a defensive look. After two more minutes, an incorrect guess on the final question, and one more scan of the room, he stands up, walks to the front of the classroom, and turns in his paper.

One month into his first semester James believes he may have just failed his first exam. "This isn't what college was supposed to be like," James thinks to himself while waiting at the bus stop. James is still living off of the money he saved up before getting out of the Army, but worries that if he doesn't receive his first GI Bill payment in the next two weeks he's going to have to ask his mom to loan him some money for rent.

At the bus stop James recognizes a girl from one of his classes but decides against trying to talk to her. "What would we even talk about?" he asks himself. He has been surprised by how different he feels from other students and that he has yet to make a real friend at school. James is only 24, but his courses are filled with fresh-faced 18-year-olds only a few months beyond their senior prom. Sometimes these kids just drive him crazy. He often wonders why they bother showing up to class if they're going to text and look at Facebook the whole time.

James takes a seat on the campus bus as it

pulls away. He's trying to enjoy the ride home, knowing he's looking at another long night. His advisor warned him that 18 credits would be demanding, but he wants to finish school as quickly as possible so he can apply to become a U.S. Marshal. James wants to be good at school, but so far he's been struggling. He's pretty sure it's just because he's been out of school a while. He does sometimes worry that his memory and focus problems are caused by a mild traumatic brain injury (mTBI), but believes that if he has this checked out he risks ruining his future career prospects. Walking into his apartment James grabs a beer from the fridge and sits down on the couch. "This isn't what college was supposed to be like."

James left active duty three months ago, enrolling in the university closest to his hometown, some 50 miles away. Despite having been deployed twice to combat zones as an infantryman, he suffered only a minor leg injury from the improvised explosive device that detonated under the vehicle to his front. He still feels guilty for the friend that didn't make it back and the others who suffered injuries more serious than his. Almost immediately upon arriving back home he felt depressed and began drinking frequently. With time, he slowly felt as though he had begun to overcome his feelings of grief and guilt. His girlfriend at the time suggested counseling, but James believed counseling was only for the people who were really messed up. He had seen those soldiers and believed he wasn't one of them. "Not me. No way!"

Checking his email a couple of weeks later, James notices a message from the school's VA office about a student veteran group on campus that is holding a lunch get together. He disregarded the email at first, but later decided to attend, thinking to himself, "Free food, why not?" At the event James was surprised by how comfortable he felt around the members of the student veteran group. They were from different branches, held different jobs and ranks, and were of different ages, but they nevertheless all seemed familiar: They were just like people he had known in the Army. During the event James noticed that the student veterans were laughing together, making fun of each other, and telling stories about that one crazy guy in their platoon or the omnipresent inept supervisor. When one of the vets turned to James and asked him if he would be coming to the next event, he replied, "I think so."

Barriers to Success

Culture Shock. Among the frequently cited challenges in the literature on student veterans is the culture shock they experience as they attempt to simultaneously navigate the unfamiliar landscape of a college campus and academia (Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021). Vacchi (2012) cites this culture shock as being caused by the fact that "[v]eterans are in an awkward position as soon as they depart military service and one of the most awkward places for a student veteran to be…is on a college campus" (p. 18). Removed from a tightly regimented and group-oriented social environment and placed into a setting which is unstructured and deeply individualistic (Borsari et al., 2017; Cunningham, 2012; Rumann et al., 2011), student veterans may struggle to adjust to these new circumstances. Like the case study of James above, successful adjustment requires student veterans to undergo a substantial change in both identity and role, something which may be particularly difficult for those who thrived in the military (Ryan et al., 2011). Today's student veterans are likely to have left a position of some leadership in the military where they were entrusted with enormous responsibility and afforded a corresponding level of respect by their peers. In contrast, upon beginning an academic career, student veterans are being asked to reclimb the social ladder. Student veterans may also feel overwhelmed by having to navigate a large, confusing, and often intimidating university bureaucracy with minimal assistance (Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021; O'Herrin, 2011), while simultaneously feeling as though they should not ask for help or "burden others with their problems" (Vacchi, 2012, p. 18). Vacchi (2012) describes learning that it is okay to ask for help and seeking help when needed as perhaps the most difficult challenge student veterans will need to overcome in college. Asking for help takes on an added importance when we consider that a disproportionately large percentage of student veterans are first-generation college students and often several years removed from an academic setting (Cunningham, 2012; Jenner, 2019; Wurster et al., 2013). One report (IVMF, 2017) stated that approximately 62% of student veterans are first generation college students. Given the social and academic challenges noted, it is not surprising that issues with acculturation

are the most commonly described difficulty among student veterans (Bonar & Domenici, 2011). According to Hunter-Johnson et al. (2021), although veterans may perceive the university as a buffer between the military and civilian worlds that does not mean that it is an easy transition.

Connecting to Student Peers. Student veterans also face the difficulty of trying to connect to student peers they have relatively little in common with in terms of age, experience, and family commitment. Just like the case study above, the student veteran finds that they are unlike many of the younger people in their classes, making them a stranger in their new environments. The demands of postsecondary education are strenuous even under ideal conditions, let alone having to do so while feeling socially isolated. One way veterans are immediately differentiated from the majority of their student peers is by their age. On average, student veterans are significantly older than traditional students, with nearly 85% of student veterans being over the age of 23 (IVMF, 2017; Steele et al., 2010, as cited in Cunningham, 2012). Branker (2009) reported that many veterans found this disparity in age and maturity shocking and that it made connecting to other more traditional students a daunting task. It is also difficult to overstate the experiential difference of a veteran to their nonveteran classroom peers. A student veteran, particularly of the Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) generation, is likely to have been deployed to a hostile foreign country multiple times for long deployments, been entrusted with multimillion-dollar equipment, and made decisions with life or death consequences (Vacchi, 2012). An individual such as this is likely going to have some difficulty relating to a student whose most dramatic life experience was moving away from home for college. Current student veterans often cite the lack of maturity of their traditional student peers as one of the most difficult challenges in the university environment (Gwin et al., 2012; Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021).

This disconnect extends beyond college students to society as a whole. Cunningham (2012) describes the detachment between the military and the rest of society as more pronounced today than at any point in the nation's history. Commonly referred to as the military-civilian divide, military veterans constitute an ever-shrinking percentage of the total population, leading to a lack of public knowledge and familiarity with regard to what the military does and the types of people who serve in it. One report indicated that in 1995 over 40% of youth had a parent who had served in the military, but by 2017 that figure was down to 15%. This decrease suggests the impact on recruitment of enlisted members from military families was more difficult, another challenge for an all-voluntary force (U.S. Department of Defense, 2019). Even with the post 9/11 surge in veteran enrollment at postsecondary institutions, veterans still constitute only 3%–4% of the national population of undergraduate students (Cunningham, 2012). Another differentiating factor among veterans is that the majority of them are either married, have children, or both (Cunningham, 2012). About 20% of current student veterans are single parents (IVMF, 2017). This leads to less free time for peer socialization and fewer opportunities to attend campus social events.

In addition, collectively these differences impact the veteran's access to networks for support and acceptance as well as a sense of belonging (Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021). Given the difficulty veterans often find in connecting to the campus community, it is not surprising that many view college as a task to be completed, rather than a period of life to be enjoyed (Ryan et al., 2011).

Psychological Health. Many of the veterans arriving on campuses today must overcome another barrier to success, the experience of trauma and its cognitive aftereffects (IVMF, 2017; Trahan, et al., 2019). Perhaps the two most defining injuries of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan are post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and mild traumatic brain injury (mTBI), neither of which is clearly visible nor well understood by the general public. While it should be remembered that the majority of student veterans do not suffer from these conditions, a significant minority do. Among returning veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) rates of PTSD have been found to be as high as 31%, with an estimate for mTBIs at just below 20%, with many veterans suffering from both (Elliott et al., 2011; Ramchand et al., 2011). These injuries are especially disadvantageous to student veterans trying to complete their education, as they have been shown to significantly impair cognitive functioning, "specifically with tasks requiring attention, verbal memory,

and new learning even after controlling for IQ and attention deficits" (Sinski, 2012, p. 87). It is difficult to think of an aspect of academic life that is not impacted by cognitive functioning. Mild traumatic brain injuries have also been associated with physical impairments, such as hearing and vision deficiencies, as well as difficulty with coordination, each of which creates yet another barrier to learning (Sinski, 2012).

Due in part to their previous military acculturation, student veterans place themselves at a disadvantage by being less likely than traditional students to report or seek help for their psychological difficulties (Bonar & Domenici, 2011). Ryan et al. (2011) note that four of the primary reasons student veterans do not seek treatment are that they do not want to be perceived as weak, they fear negative long-term career repercussions, they are concerned with the side effects of medication, and they are skeptical that treatment will work. This is an important reminder, just as in the case study of James above, that even if appropriate services are made available on campus there is no guarantee that they will be utilized by those most in need of them. Thus, access must include not only geographical proximity but also active outreach to the veteran population that establishes credibility such as with peers (Selber, 2014).

Physical Disabilities. Near miraculous advances in medical treatment have ensured that military service members are more likely than ever to survive combat and training injuries, leading to a dramatic increase in the college enrollment of wounded veterans. Although the number of reported wounded warriors varies, the military has estimated that more than 52,000 service members have been wounded in OEF and OIF since 2001 (Defense Casualty Analysis System, 2019). Among the most common physical injuries seen in the recent conflicts have been bone and muscle damage often sustained from improvised explosive devices (DiRamio & Spires, 2009). Many of these wounded soldiers will face lifelong difficulties with mobility. The sprawling and open environment that helps give many college campuses so much of their aesthetic appeal may prove to be a significant obstacle to a wounded student veteran. This could require many to adjust their academic schedule due to an inability to travel quickly enough between classes. It should also be noted that many student veterans suffer from similar mobility difficulties, simply due to the ordinary wear and tear of their military career.

Another disability common among student veterans relates to hearing. In fact, the most commonly documented service-connected disability for returning veterans of OEF/OIF is tinnitus (American Tinnitus Association, n.d.). This ailment is most commonly caused by prolonged exposure to loud noise and is characterized by a ringing in the ears when there is otherwise no audible noise present (ATA, n.d.). In addition to causing hearing problems, severe cases of tinnitus can interfere with sleep and concentration (Wilkinson, 2009), both of which are critical to academic success. While colleges are often willing to provide reasonable accommodations to those students with disabilities when available, there is once again a concern that many student veterans with these health issues will fail to seek out these services (Branker, 2009).

Interventions Aimed at Assisting Student Veterans

Orientation. Postsecondary institutions can better assist veterans in making the difficult transition to college life by welcoming them with an orientation process that is age appropriate and targets their specific needs. In fact, new student orientation for veterans is often listed as a best practice for military friendly campuses (Dillard & Yu, 2016). It is often the case that colleges do not require student veterans to attend new student orientations due to their age or the number of credits previously earned. Given that few are likely to attend an event that is not required, this leaves the student veteran in the position of having to find their own way around campus without that initial assistance. Unfortunately, the alternative is hardly better. Given the extent to which student veterans identify as feeling older and out of place in comparison to traditional students (Jackson & Sheehan, 2005), it is difficult to imagine an environment more uncomfortable for an incoming student veteran than being surrounded by 18-year-olds who completed high school just three months prior. In addition, much of the information that would actually benefit student veterans, such as that pertaining to the school's Veteran Affairs office where benefits are processed, is typically not included during orientation (O'Herrin, 2011). Some colleges have listened to student veterans' requests regarding this issue and have initiated smaller veteran-only orientations, though a recent study found just 4% of institu-

tions offered this (Cook & Kim, 2009, as cited in Ryan et al., 2011). Some colleges have made a compromise between the two and have student veterans attend short breakout sessions apart from traditional students during orientation (O'Herrin, 2011). A small number of institutions have taken the approach to orientation a step further and created veteran-only freshman-year experience classes taught by faculty members who are either themselves a veteran or are familiar with student veteran issues (Selber, 2010). While FYE courses may be ideal, an orientation process in which student veterans are provided an opportunity to receive information relevant to them and connect with other student veterans is an important step forward for many institutions.

Academic Cohorts. Placing new student veterans together in an academic cohort may reduce the commonly experienced feelings of anxiety and alienation while improving their academic performance. Academic cohorts, also frequently referred to as learning communities, are becoming increasingly popular in postsecondary education (Lei et al., 2011). A cohort can be defined as "a group of about 10-25 students who begin a program of study together, proceed together through a series of developmental experiences in the context of that program, and end the program at approximately the same time" (Lei et al., 2011, p. 497–498). The social benefits a cohort model could have for student veterans should be readily apparent. These veterans will be immediately integrated with similarly situated and experienced peers, thus helping them to avoid the commonly expressed feelings of isolation and confusion during their first year on campus.

The academic benefits of cohort education or a structured learning community are well documented and quite impressive. Goldman (2012) notes that cohort education programs produce "better grades, higher rates of course completion, improved retention of students in second and third years and higher rates of graduation" (p. 1). Although more data are needed regarding how well student veterans would respond to this type of model, early reports are impressive. In a pilot study conducted at Cleveland State University, Schupp (2013) found that student veterans enrolled together in a first-year cohort attempted more credit hours, were more likely to successfully complete the courses they took, were more likely to return for their second year, and had a grade-point average nearly one full point higher than the noncohort student veteran sample (3.54 vs. 2.57). The veteran cohort program at Cleveland State has since become so successful that student veteran grade-point averages now outpace that of traditional students, 3.3 to 2.9 (Cunningham, 2012). Schupp (2013) suggests that these cohorts should be limited to the first year, allowing student veterans to feel engaged with the institution and develop supportive peer relationships but preventing them from becoming isolated from the rest of the campus community. In addition, he suggests that these cohorts should be purely optional. Given the academic and social benefits, to include higher levels of student satisfaction with their collegiate experience (Goldman, 2012), it is difficult to think of a reason why colleges with a sufficient student veteran population should not offer a first-year cohort education option.

Student Veteran Organization. An effective method for connecting veterans to each other is through the creation of a student veteran group on campus. Student veteran groups have begun springing up across the country since 2008. The creation of these groups has come about due in large part to the desire of student veterans to meet and interact with people they can relate to (Ackerman et al., 2009). Credit must also go to the efforts of Student Veterans of America (SVA), now boasting more than 1500 affiliated chapters, an organization that helps institutions develop student veteran groups (Student Veterans of America, 2021). Ryan et al. (2011) describe student veteran groups as an ideal way of providing social support, coping skills, and help with integrating into college life. Social support may be especially important to this population, as it has been shown to be an effective buffer against the stressors which exacerbate psychological health problems (Cohen, 2004, as cited in Elliott et al., 2011; Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021). Here it is worth repeating that student veterans are far less likely to seek out professional help for mental health problems than traditional students (Bonar & Domenici, 2011), therefore making them far more dependent upon informal means of assistance.

Another important role of student veteran groups relates to their advocacy function. At the institutional level, some groups have helped to develop institutional reforms that positively

impact student veterans. An example of this is the work done at multiple institutions related to the changing of withdrawal and reenrollment policies for deployed service members of the Reserves and National Guard (Summerlot et al., 2009). On occasion, student veteran groups will also be involved in advocating issues at the state level. There has likely been no better example of the positive advocacy work done by student veteran organizations than the efforts of SVA in helping to bring about changes in the Post 9/11 GI Bill. The importance and effect of student veteran groups is difficult to overstate. Whether working as a political action campaign, a social club, an information depot, or an informal therapy group, student veteran organizations can be a valuable asset to a campus community (Selber, 2014; Summerlot et al., 2009).

Faculty and Staff Training. Given that veterans arrive on campus with needs that differ from traditional students, institutions can better assist this population by providing instructors and staff with targeted training. This training and instruction can take many forms, but a starting point would be to educate faculty and staff about common traits and perspectives of student veterans and some of the frequently occurring issues they may have. An example of this would be to inform instructors of ways in which the classroom experience could potentially trigger a hyper arousal response in a combat veteran suffering from PTSD (Perry, 2001, as cited in Sinski, 2012). This example can be seen in the case study of James above taking an exam and hearing noises in the classroom that distracted him from his task at hand. Instructors are unlikely to know that this could be caused by things as seemingly innocuous as hovering above a seated student, physically touching them, or assigning a student veteran to a seat which does not allow them to have their back against the wall and an open pathway to an exit (Sinski, 2012). Some reports indicate that 57% of schools did not offer even an optional staff training for working with student veterans, and 64% did not offer training for working with disabled veterans (Cook & Kim, 2009) Faculty education should also involve some degree of sensitivity training to veterans needs and strengths. Ackerman et al. (2009) describe a combat veteran they interviewed who had a sociology professor refer to American soldiers as terrorists, leading the student to refrain from attending further classes and subsequently fail the course. While occurrences such as this are surely an exception, training could help to prevent incidents like this from happening in the future. Such training can help faculty and other students interact and involve veterans in campus life (Selber, 2014).

Another concern often expressed by student veterans is that it is difficult to find someone knowledgeable on veterans' issues in campus offices. When possible, campus offices should task and train at least one staff member with becoming knowledgeable on veterans' issues related to their office. This cultural competency training is important (Cate & Albright, 2015). One important example is academic advising. Advisors may be unaware that student veterans must have an academic major at all times and that they risk losing Post 9/11 GI Bills funds if they take a course which is declared outside the scope of their particular degree plan. Also, large universities often have their own counseling services, but one can only speculate as to how many have experience working with combat veterans suffering from PTSD. Finally, it is especially important today to have someone in the disability services office who understands the difficulties associated with obtaining disability documentation from the VA and recognizes that most disabled veterans have wounds which are not easily visible. Although training cannot solve every problem, it can go a long way toward making this population feel understood and welcome on campus.

Finances. Despite the current Post 9/11 GI Bill being the most financially substantial version yet, many student veterans continue to face serious financial difficulties while attempting to complete their education. A recent needs assessment conducted at a large public university in Texas found that 69% of student veterans who considered withdrawing from the institution cited financial difficulties as a contributing factor, making it the most frequently cited factor found in the study (Gwin et al., 2012). An especially difficult period is the first semester on campus, as many student veterans must wait several weeks before receiving their first benefits payment. Cunningham (2012) notes that in November of 2010 the average processing time between an original claim made to the VA and payment to the student veteran was 62 days, nearly three times the length of the VA's intended goal. In the meantime, student veterans are expected to pay for living expenses, rent, and in some cases tuition, all while attending classes

and trying to adjust to college life. While student veterans do receive benefits in a timelier manner in subsequent semesters, they do not receive their living stipend during times when class is not in session, a period of about three months out of every year (Cunningham, 2012). In addition, if degree completion takes longer to achieve than the three years of the Post 9/11 GI Bill benefit, then student veterans may have to cover remaining semesters out-of-pocket (Cate, 2014). Studies have suggested that accessing timely information about the educational benefits policies are associated with academic retention, indicating that it is important for institutions to educate student veterans about how their benefits work (Borsari et al., 2017; Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021).

Although these challenges can be daunting, there are several remedies available to institutions for easing this financial stress. The most obvious is that institutions should offer tuition payment holds until they receive payment from the VA, rather than insisting the student veteran attempt to pay tuition out of pocket and then wait for a refund. This costs the college nothing, and the money is guaranteed to be paid, as payment is sent directly to the institution (Vacchi, 2012). Although many colleges already have this in place, some do not, and this places stress on student veterans. To assist economically vulnerable student veterans, particularly those in their first semester who have yet to receive their first payment, institutions would be advised to establish an emergency relief fund from which student veterans can receive assistance grants or at least temporarily borrow money for living expenses. Given the fact that many student veterans could benefit from the financial support and work experience provided by work study opportunities, faculty and staff should be encouraged to hire student veterans. On the whole, student veterans are task-oriented and have skill sets far more diverse than people think, making them a potentially valuable resource for colleges. A final method for reducing economic difficulties would be to advertise and encourage student veterans to apply for more scholarships. In addition to the many scholarships available to traditional students, there are also a great many which are exclusively available to student veterans. While the suggestions presented here are likely to have only a modest effect, this may be all that is needed to keep some student veterans in school.

Conclusions and Recommendations

There is little doubt that student veterans will continue to arrive on college campuses in increasing numbers for the foreseeable future. If we do not begin to implement targeted intervention strategies for improving their outcomes, then we are not guarding an important resource allocated by taxpayers and the hard-earned benefits won by our nation's veterans. Student veterans have much to offer classrooms and campuses in the way of knowledge, experience, and leadership. But to reap these benefits, colleges will have to be prepared to meet some of the special needs of this population. Programming like faculty and staff training and disability support services can go a long way toward improving a veteran's perception of an institution and creating a sense of belonging which keeps them engaged. One of the most important things that campuses can do is help veterans connect with each other. Connecting student veterans appears to lie at the very heart of the success found in interventions like student veteran organizations and academic cohorts and learning communities. A natural experiment has already tested this supposition once before. Veterans returning from World War II flooded into colleges and universities because of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, later to be renamed the GI Bill, and found enormous success (Cunningham, 2012). Rather than feeling isolated and alone, veterans of that era constituted more than 88% of the student population and graduated at an estimated rate of 78% (Schupp, 2013). This article hypothesizes that these veterans recreated on college campuses the unit cohesion and sense of purpose they had felt on the battlefields of Europe and Asia, providing each other with four years of informal support. This reflects the importance of peer support in facilitating success and overcoming obstacles. In order to help student veterans' likelihood of achieving academic success, connecting them to each other would seem to be at once both the least we could do for them and perhaps also the most we can do for them. After WWII, veterans poured into colleges and graduated, fueling one of the most impressive eras of exploration, discovery, and renewal, changing the face of our private, public, and civic sectors and creating leadership within institutions that has since then been unparalleled. We owe this Next Greatest Generation the same chance to take the mantle of leadership and solve

some of our current generation's most complex problems. Our universities must help these veterans win the academic battle now in order to be the next generation of our institutions' leaders.

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