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Identifying the Camouflage: Uncovering and Supporting the Transition Experiences of Military and Veteran Students

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Abstract

This study summarizes the qualitative findings from a multi-institutional study about the college transition experiences of military and veteran students, specifically students' articulation of their needs. Findings reveal (a) a lack of in-processing, (b) need for community, and (c) institutional invisibility. Using the Student Veteran Transition Model developed by Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, and Flemming (2011) as a guide, four recommendations for institutional practice are provided.

Disciplines

Educational Sociology | Family, Life Course, and Society | Higher Education | Military and Veterans Studies

Comments

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With the passing of the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act, commonly referred to as the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill, in 2008, the number of veteran and military students is growing rapidly (Bauman, 2013; Cate, 2014; De Sawal, 2013; Nichols-Basebolt, 2012; Sanders, 2013; Vacchi, 2012). Students with military experience (SWME) have different experiences transitioning to higher education institutions than their non-military peers, and institutions need to examine these differences closely in order to serve this population (Cook & Kim, 2009; Ostovary & Dapprich, 2011; Wheeler, 2012). Studies have shown that SWME may feel isolated in, and excluded from, their campus communities (Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Flemming, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010), undervalued in the classroom (Williams, 2013), and frustrated by financial delays (U.S. Government Accountability Office [USGAO], 2013).

Currently, higher education institutions are in the process of developing programs, offices, and policies to serve this emerging population (Jackson, Fey, & Ewing Ross, 2013) but are doing much of this work based on perceived needs rather than empirical data (Barry, Whiteman, & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2014; Bauman, 2013; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Livingston et al., 2011). State and federal governments and higher education institutions demonstrate their belief that providing access to a college education is a valuable endeavor by investing a significant amount of time and money in assisting veteran students (Cook & Kim, 2009; Lang & Powers, 2011; McGovern, 2012; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012). Nevertheless, in most instances these investments are made without a comprehensive understanding of the needs and experiences of this population of students (McGovern, 2012; Moon & Schma, 2011).

The purpose of this study is to understand how SWME make the transition to a higher education institution. The specific question framing the study was: What do SWME perceive as their needs related to their successful transition to the institution?

Theoretical Framework and Review of Literature

The Student Veteran Academic and Social Transition Model (SVATSTM) developed by Livingston et al. (2011) informed the study. The SVATSTM includes four components influencing how a student veteran navigates the re-enrollment process: cornerstones, auxiliary aid, environment and navigating (re)enrollment (see Figure 1). Livingston et al. showed that military socialization influences the use of auxiliary aid such as peers and support systems for the transition of veterans, which, in turn, influences the navigation of enrollment and use of support structures. Livingston et al. illustrated the interconnectedness of experiences that frame the transition for SWME. This connected, comprehensive view also serves as an appropriate framework from which to discuss the existing literature.
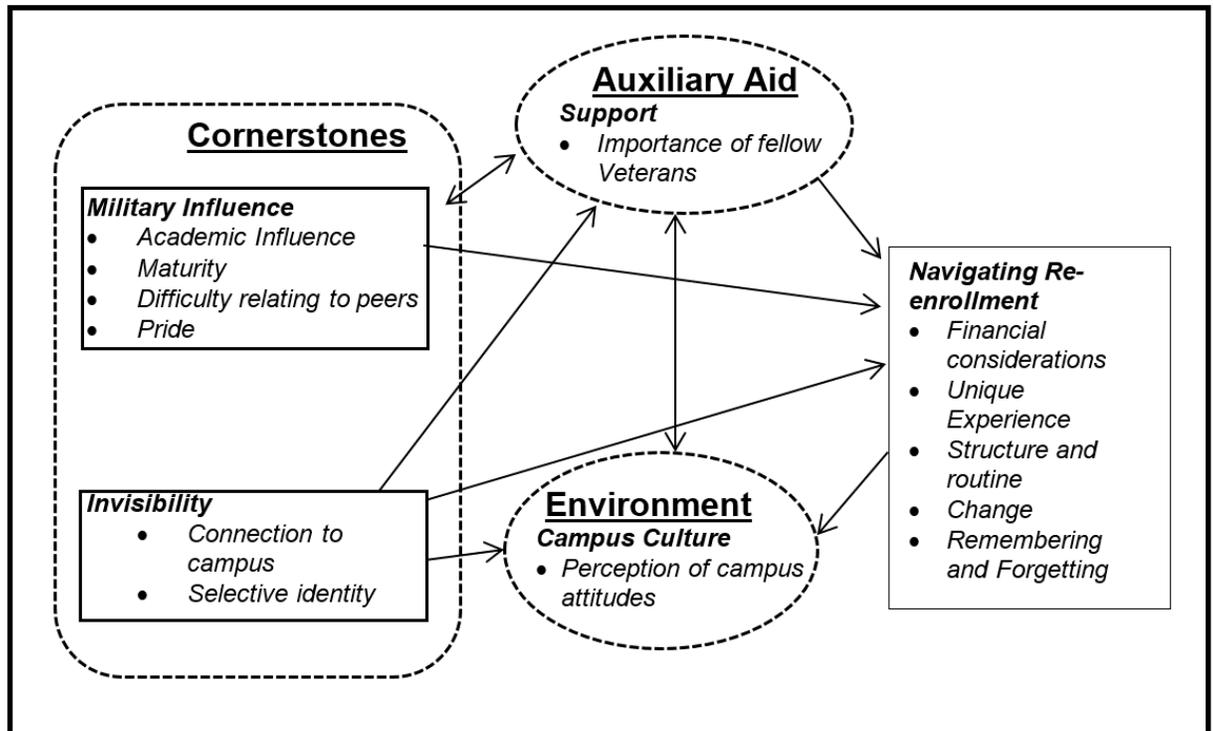
Figure 1. The Student Veteran Academic and Social Transition Model (SVATSTM) developed by Livingston et al. (2011)

Cornerstones

Livingston et al. (2011) identified academic emphasis as one of the cornerstones SWME possess entering the classroom: SWME felt they placed a higher emphasis on academic performance than they would have prior to serving in the military. This emphasis on academic success has been explored in existing literature about the academic experiences of SWME.

Ackerman et al. (2009) and DiRamio et al. (2008) found that veterans may feel underprepared for the academic rigors of college, but De Sawal (2013) asserted that student veterans and service members have better study habits and spend as much time studying as their non-military peers. Wilson and Smith (2012) attributed the academic success of SWME to their application of the same level of rigor to their studies as they would to carrying out a mission in the military. These findings are contrary to those from Durdella and Kim (2012), who found that student veterans more often engaged in advanced academic behaviors (studying frequently, emailing professors, contributing to class discussions, etc.) but still had lower GPAs than non-military peers, even when controlling for entering characteristics. Extant literature consistently suggests that SWME are adept at academic behavior but is inconclusive in terms of the academic performance of SWME.

The classroom environment may cause difficulty for SWME (O'Herrin, 2011). Those environments that encourage creative thinking and reflection without clear direction may create a cultural dissonance for student veterans and service members whose military training required strict adherence to the chain of command and obeying a commanding officer (De Sawal, 2013; Rumann, 2010; Wheeler, 2012). These differences may cause difficulty for students transitioning to the academic environment of the institution.

Auxiliary Aid

Auxiliary aid and campus environment as identified by Livingston et al. (2011) both include the social experiences SWME might encounter during their transition. These social experiences may relate to support structures or a variety of campus interactions. During their initial transition to college, SWME returning from combat may experience feelings of isolation, especially if adapting to civilian life at the same time (Brown & Gross, 2011; Burnett & Segoria, 2009; Mikelson & Saunders, 2013). Though support from non-campus entities such as friends and family has been shown to be beneficial, a lack of connection on campus may negatively affect a student's transition and persistence (Whiteman et al., 2013). SWME often report feeling a disconnection between themselves and their non-military peers who may not have the same level of maturity or understanding of combat experiences (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Rumann, Rivera, Hernandez, Cox, & Watson, 2011).

Campus connections with fellow SWME can offer a sense of connectedness to the institution (DiRamio et al., 2008; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010), and Student Veterans of America chapters have grown at colleges and universities across the country in recent years, providing an organizational framework for veterans to gather (Rumann et al., 2011). Whiteman et al. (2013) found that an increase in emotional support from peers was related to a smoother academic adjustment and positive mental health. Literature on SWME has consistently heralded relationships among SWME as a key to successful transition experiences. This study addressed whether these connections or lack of connections also affected the transition experience of SWME.

Environment

SWME re-enrolling or entering an institution directly after service may view the campus as an anti-veteran and unwelcoming environment, based on real or perceived views of peers and staff (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). O'Herrin (2011) outlined how faculty members need to be cognizant of the experiences of SWME so that classroom environments are not seen as hostile, and Rumann (2010) shared that SWME perceive their non-military peers' ambivalence toward military service. In recent years, institutions have added centers to serve SWME or increased the number of support services to SWME to assist with student transitions. Institutions and state governments are providing financial incentives for SWME as a way to increase accessibility and demonstrate their commitment to serving SWME. The results of this study may provide insight into the impact of the environment on transitions for SWME.

Navigating Re-enrollment

Livingston et al. (2011) identified financial considerations as one of the components of managing re-enrollment for SWME. SWME have access to military educational benefits but may lack the knowledge about the processes required to access the funding, which can be highly bureaucratic and often confusing (Mikelson & Saunders, 2013; USGAO, 2013). Veteran students may experience delays in the processing of their benefits; during these delays, students may still be able to attend classes but may not have the funds to cover rent, food, or books (Mikelson & Saunders; Rumann, 2010; Steel et al. 2010; USGAO). In addition, although the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill and other military educational benefits offer unprecedented benefits to veterans, the eligibility for those programs depends on many factors, including length and timing of service, geographical location, and post-secondary educational decisions (Wheeler, 2012). These delays and confusion in navigating the financial bureaucracy can have significant impacts on students' transitions to an institution; these factors were therefore included in this study.

Summary

The transition experiences of SWME have been documented largely through small-scale studies (see, e.g., Bauman, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Livingston et al., 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010), but research involving a larger population of SWME at multiple institutions is lacking. Previous literature has focused on the role of the academic, financial, and social experiences in SWME transitions to college. Through an on-line survey containing open-ended questions and disseminated to students at 13 institutions including three different institutional types, this study contributes to the literature on SWME transitions. The Livingston et al. (2011) model is a framework that encapsulates much of this research and helped informed the data analysis and interpretation of the results of this study.

Method

The Iowa Survey of Military and Veteran Students was used to assess transition-to-college experiences for SWME at 13 institutions. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained from each campus before surveys were disseminated.

The goal of this research was to examine the transition experience of SWME using a cross-sectional, non-experimental survey design, with data collected at one point in time across the selected population (Creswell, 2014). Mann and Stewart (2000) make the case that researchers must collect rich, descriptive data in order to seek understanding and that qualitative data derived from survey research can provide important insights.

Participants

The participants in the current study were 355 undergraduate SWME enrolled in 13 institutions in one Midwestern state—2 research universities, 2 masters-level institutions, 2 baccalaureate colleges and 7 community colleges. The participant demographics were similar to population demographics in terms of institution type, sex, and race or ethnicity. SWME were those students who self-identified as veterans of the U.S. Armed Forces or as current military personnel.

Data Collection

Data were collected using an adapted version of the Iowa Survey of Veteran and Military Students (ISVMS; Senia, Watson, & Williams, 2013). Participants provided demographic information and responded to two open-ended questions. The first question asked participants to evaluate their transition to the institution. The second question asked students to suggest programs and services that their institution should offer to improve the transition experience for SWME.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using inductive, or hermeneutic-interpretive, content analysis (Bros & Tarnai, 1999). Inductive content analysis involves highlighting phrases related to each research question, grouping phrases by content area, grouping areas into categories, linking categories, and organizing these categories (Bros & Tarnai, 1999; Moretti et al., 2011).

Trustworthiness was enhanced through the use of rich, thick description (Creswell, 2014) and peer review (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). A peer reviewer uninvolved with the study read all open-ended responses and provided constructive feedback for the researchers' initial results.

Results

Students reflected on their initial transition experiences to the institution regardless of their time at the institution. Many students shared ambivalent or positive comments about their transition experiences. Students who expressed positive comments about their transition experiences regularly expressed appreciation for individuals and policies that may help to address climate concerns as reflected in the "environment" factor in the model by Livingston et al. (2011). One participant added that the campus veteran center staff members were helpful but "lack institutional power or function."   This participant, a veteran attending a four-year public institution, added that "veterans' needs go far beyond needing someone to talk to or help with short-term employment. We have real and unique issues that need to be addressed at the university wide level."   For those who expressed challenges, three themes emerged: lack of in-processing, lack of community, and institutional invisibility.

Lack of In-Processing

In military terminology, in-processing is the structured series of steps designed for military personnel new to a position or location to gain the needed knowledge. As it applies to this study, it refers to the steps and processes SWME need to follow in order to receive benefits, gets registered for classes, and so on. Continually, participants commented on the lack of instruction or direction they experienced when entering the academic institution, especially in terms of utilizing resources for SWME.

Participants expressed appreciation for the campus entities that eventually provided them with guidance, but they often lamented that these entities could be difficult to find. A National Guard member attending a public four-year institution shared, "It's pretty easy to talk to [the veterans services coordinator] about benefits ... but the hard part was figuring out someone to contact when I was a freshman … when I came into contact with [him], everything seemed easy."

Multiple respondents shared the notion that people with military background experience may have a preference for solving problems independently. Further, they commented that they would prefer specific guidelines during the transition but do not require hand-holding. A student veteran attending a community college added, "We don't expect handouts, we just want to know that help is available if we feel the need."

To assist with these transition concerns, many students suggested that institutions conduct a veteran or military student-specific orientation. A student veteran attending a community college suggested that the institution:

> Perhaps coordinate with the VA to get some real meat and potatoes information on how, exactly, to do things. Like getting your AARTS [Army Registry Transcript Service, currently known as a Joint Services Transcript] transcripts into the college's hands … most military personnel have to be shown the right way to do something, and are too proud to ask if there's a better way.

Along with suggestions for an orientation session or program, participants expressed a need for sponsorship (mentorship) from fellow SWME. Participants expressed how sponsorship would allow new SWME to navigate the transition and also to build community. As a student veteran shared, "My experience was drastically improved when someone volunteered to be my sponsor and guide me around campus."

Need for Community

Throughout their responses, participants described their need for community. SWME, especially those recently separated from military life or combat, may struggle to find individuals with similar experiences. A student veteran attending a four-year public institution who recently returned from deployment shared:

> I did not connect with students because they were younger and I didn't connect with teachers because I was a first year student … being away from the camaraderie and military lifestyle so short after returning home made it emotionally draining.

Other participants expressed similar disconnection with the campus community, who they felt lacked awareness or empathy for experiences of SWME. A veteran attending a four-year public institution shared:

> Academically my transition was relatively smooth. Socially the transition was horrible. I went from having and being around friends everyday (while enlisted) to having nobody … There is little [within the institution] community that I can connect with.

Participants recommended the formation of a military and veteran student organization or club to help connect students with each other. A veteran attending a community college suggested that a gathering of SWME

> gives military members [the opportunity] to be in one room to meet others like us. In fact I met one [veteran] in a class … I invited him over to play some video games. And we got to talking … found out he had been having suicidal thoughts. All because he didn't fit in the civilian world and needs military friends who understand what we are going through.

Finally, many participants highlighted a need for a community that is inclusive to family members of SWME. Nearly half the participants shared that they had spouses and/or dependent children during their transition, and multiple participants shared needs related to family members' acclimation and support.

Institutional invisibility

Participants highlighted experiences where their military or veteran identities were ignored or seemed undervalued by their institutions. These experiences manifested in three ways: (1) staff unprepared to assist SWME with processes and policies, (2) faculty or institutional policies that are unhelpful for SWME, and (3) a climate unwelcoming to SWME.

Unprepared staff. Participants shared that campus staff were often unprepared to assist them with items such as navigating benefits or applying military credit. Many students cited a lack of training and awareness and also feelings of being given the "run-around" in terms of finding answers. A National Guard member shared:

> It seemed like nobody wanted to actually help, I would call someone and they would send me to someone else, then that person would send me to someone else, etc. It took numerous months to finally get through to the correct people.

Participants suggested that advisers and academic staff be thoroughly trained to understand and apply military credit from the Joint Services Transcript; one participant described the current level of knowledge about applying credit as being "grossly incomplete."

Bauman (2013) found that students re-entering their institutions following deployment identified campus faculty and staff as either allies, the unconcerned, or new enemies. In Bauman's study, the new enemies were often offices enforcing policy or procedure the students found to be unwelcoming and sometimes aggressively anti-veteran. Many participants requested that institutions have a point-person who can provide students with accurate information, especially as it relates to military educational benefits, where procedures at the federal level can be complicated and change often.

Unhelpful policies. Participants experienced re-licensing shock or frustration with the lack of credit applied to their degree from military coursework and experiences. Participants expressed that credits they thought would be applied were not and that they were frustrated when forced to take courses to learn materials they felt they already knew. A veteran attending a community college shared:

> [the institution] didn't acknowledge a single credit from my military time … It was extremely frustrating to have to start at the same place as all of the 18-year-olds fresh out of high school. I felt like [the institution] said, "So what, who cares that you were in the military ..."

A veteran and National Guard member attending a four-year public institution shared:

> [A]s someone who is in the Exercise Science program, I feel that basic combat training should count for credits within the major and not just elective credit. We learn a lot about conditioning and proper nutrition and hydration.

Participants expressed how instructional policies invalidated their military experiences and suggested ways in which the institution could show support or further validate military experience. A National Guard member attending a four-year public institution shared:

> I experienced much resistance from teachers willing to work with me when drill or any sort of training conflicted with my classes … I even had one professor when I had to leave for duty tell me when I returned that I could expect an alternate, harder version of the test … I also had another faculty member tell me that I should have chose [sic] between serving my country and getting an education because I can't do both at the same time.

Unwelcoming climate. Participants mentioned that their service-related injuries were not taken seriously. A veteran attending a community college shared a classroom experience:

> When another classmate overheard me saying I was [disabled] he started calling me a liar and making fun of me. The teacher only laughed at the jokes being said and even made a few at me also.

Multiple participants raised better parking as a need for those battling PTSD and service-related injuries. A veteran attending a four-year public institution shared:

> [The institution] does not account for the special requirements of combat veterans. This is shown primarily in the assumptions made of all students, e.g., the insistence on using public transportation. My personal combat experiences make crowded confined spaces extremely uncomfortable.

Finally, participants shared that issues related to SWME should be of higher importance to the institution and that veterans should be recognized as an important population on the campus. A veteran attending a four-year public institution added that "veterans' needs go far beyond needing

someone to talk to or help with short-term employment. We have real and unique issues that need to be addressed at the university wide level." A veteran attending a four-year private institution said:

> In the two years I went to [institution], this is the first time I've ever been asked about my military experience … I wish [institution] would have had a survey like this upon acceptance of my application. In that way I would have at least felt that they were accommodating me in some way for my service.

Many shared that they felt the institution is anti-military and, thus, anti-military student and anti-veteran. A National Guard member attending a four-year public institution shared, "At no time have I seen any reason to feel that the [institution] supports our military. Absolutely none." A participant attending a four-year private institution shared how she felt her peers and instructors viewed her: "I did not tell anyone in my class I was in the military because I don't want to be treated weird/different. We are often treated as though we do not have a brain."

Discussion and Implications for Practice

This study is an exploration of what SWME perceive that they need for a successful transition to their institution. The findings affirm and build upon the four components identified in the model by Livingston et al. (2011) and offer some suggestions to inform practice.

Cornerstones. Livingston et al. (2011) outlined how cornerstones influence how SWME navigate the re-enrollment into the institution directly and indirectly though auxiliary aid and environmental factors. The themes identified by Livingston et al. (2011) as cornerstones including military influence (e.g., academic influence, maturity, difficulty relating to peers and pride) were also found in this study.

Consistent with existing literature (see DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Rumann et al., 2011), some SWME shared in their comments that they had difficulty relating to civilian students during their transition. In understanding the relationships that SWME report during their transitions, administrators can better understand some of the social underpinnings of the transition experience.

Participants shared that they and other SWME may be resistant to asking for help from campus resources. Participants phrased this resistance to help-seeking as pride, which is included as part of the cornerstones of the Livingston et al. (2011) model. This behavior, however, could be reframed as a preference for solving problems independently. As institutions consider how best to serve this population, both possibilities should be considered. A population who prefers to solve problems independently might be more likely to seek or utilize resources if they are presented in a way that students can utilize them independently (e.g., web and printed resources). This said, participants repeatedly shared their difficulty in finding resources as they navigated enrollment and transition—institutions can begin to consider how resources and guidelines can be centralized so that help-seeking from campus resources is normalized.

Recommendations for Practice

Provide information to SWME prior to enrollment. Institutions provide a significant amount of information to students before arriving on campus. Information tailored specifically for SWME should be included with their pre-arrival documents. This information could include instruction on how to prepare for transferring military credit, policies regarding military educational benefits, and information on resources.

Auxiliary aid. The need for and importance of community among veteran and military students is clear. The camaraderie found within the military may be lacking on campus for some individuals as they transition to their institutions, especially those who transition immediately following the end of their service or return from deployment. Participants in this study articulated the need for support from peers who understand military culture and can relate to the specific issues SWME experience upon their transition to a college or university. This finding could have critical implications for how resources are allocated to support students, including the formation of learning communities, gathering spaces, or support for student-to-student interactions such as through sponsorship or structured organizations. Livingston et al. (2011) identified the role of community as auxiliary aid.

Provide opportunities for connecting. Participants mentioned the need to connect with other SWME. These opportunities could take various forms: designating a physical space such as a veteran or military center, developing a student organization or support group, coordinating a mentoring program, or planning events designed to bring SWME together. DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) recommended that institutions with more than 1% of their population identifying as SWME should consider devoting resources to creating a space, office, or staff position devoted to SWME.

Mentoring or sponsorship programs are recommended as a way to build community. A peer sponsor would allow students to learn from experienced peers and gain needed information and also build relationships among military and veteran students. Beuchner (2014) labeled this kind of program contextual mentoring, where mentors can help new students make meaning of their experiences while being able to relate to both the military and academic contexts. As institutions discuss the allocation of resources, they should consider the need for peer support programs, keeping in mind that multiple transitions may be occurring simultaneously for veterans who are transitioning both to college and from the military.

Navigating re-enrollment. Navigating re-enrollment emerged in this study as managing bureaucracy, as some participants transitioned to their institutions after military service. The perception of negative attitudes from peers, faculty, and staff emerged through participant responses, and yet a number of participants shared how an individual connection with a specific staff person or office made the difference in how they perceived their frustration. Often, these delays and "red tape" were interpreted as a lack of care by the institution. Although campus individuals may not be able to change policies regarding how credits are accepted or to accelerate processing of benefits, an individual who is willing to explain the process and listen to the students has a significant positive impact.

Bureaucracy is part of any complex organization such as a college or university, but SWME encountered additional bureaucracies in navigating the institutional environment. In many instances, higher education institutions can also be at the mercy of federal and state bureaucracies. For example, a student whose benefits are held up at the federal level could go months without income, resulting in unpaid university bills, books unpurchased, or lack of funding to the costs of rent or food. With the understanding of these larger state and federal bureaucracies, institutions could alter their policies to assist SWME. At many institutions, students with unpaid bills are not allowed to register or receive transcripts. These restrictions could be waived for students who are awaiting benefits. Institutions could develop short-term, interest-free loans that would allow students to cover their living expenses as they wait for their benefits. These types of actions help to validate and support the SWME transition.

Create a point person. Navigating institutional bureaucracy is challenging for many SWME. Therefore, identifying one person on campus as a first contact may be useful. This point person does not have to oversee all services, but he or she can provide support and resources to help students understand the context for the bureaucracy and navigate it as efficiently as possible.

Offer training to campus faculty and staff. Institutions should offer training to campus faculty and staff about serving SWME. Cook and Kim (2009) concluded that, nationally, the majority of institutions do not provide training but that it should be an institutional priority; Moon and Schma (2011) recommended ongoing training regarding serving SWME for faculty and staff. This training could include findings from this study as a picture of the experiences of students, campus resources for SWME so that faculty and staff might refer students, and a component that challenges faculty and staff to identify their own biases about military personnel and veterans. Training can provide institutional agents with the information needed to better serve students, and it should be developed in such a way that it is accessible to all faculty and staff.

Provide in-processing. Most institutions currently offer orientation programs for new or transfer students, and programs specifically targeted to SWME may also be useful. Moon and Schma (2011) recommended that institutions develop an orientation program specifically designed for SWME. Students with multiple deployments may find themselves transitioning back to college several times or returning several years after their first entrance. Many of these returning students may benefit more from transition programs that provide them access to resources, information on policies, and connections to the larger community of SWME than from orientation programs designed for all students.

Recommendations for Future Research

The limitations of the current study frame the agenda for future research into the experiences of SWME. SWME are a diverse group and the specific experiences of individuals vary. This study reported on the experiences of the overall group without delineating among different subpopulations. Research on college students demonstrates that different demographics such as academic preparation, gender, race, and income level all influence transition. Future research can investigate how these factors influence the transition experience for SWME. There are also differences among SWME in terms of the length of time spent in service, the type of experience in the military (i.e., combat versus non-combat), and physical or emotional factors related to these experiences. Research is needed to explore how these differences impact SWME and how institutions can best support this population. Additionally, this study focused on one geographical location; future research should expand to include other regions. A mixed methods approach would allow researchers to build on trends that emerged through this study, with quantitative data showing the relationships between these experiences and GPA. Finally, this study was viewed from the lens of exploring SWME in aggregate and largely ignored the broader institutional context. A critical examination of policies, personnel, practices, and structures at the institutional level may also provide information needed to create environments that support the transition of SWME.

Conclusion

The number of military and veteran students on college campuses is expected to grow. This population has unique needs and faces unique challenges related to transitioning to the institution, including added layers of bureaucracy and experiences that may be significant but unrecognized by the institution. SWME are a valuable component of our institutional makeup, and expanding our understanding of the needs of this population will allow us to serve them better.

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