

For Those Who Served the Mission Continues: Veteran Integration Back into Civilian Life via Higher Education after Military Service

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Abstract

Veteran integration back into society from military service is a lingering social problem due to the lack of research surrounding the issues that many veterans face today in regards to emotional stability. After time spent in combat zones many veterans are facing psychological issues such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and physical disabilities but these are only some of the problems veterans face since many of them chose to pursue higher education after their military service. How can we help veterans integrate back into civilian life through higher education after military service? This research conducts in-depth interviews with student veterans to obtain information on what problems they are in fact experiencing reintegrating back into society and to learn the effectiveness of available programs designed to help them. The research expects to find unique problems that student veterans have in transitioning back into society through higher education and the reasons why some available programs prove effective while other do not. This research seeks to make an important contribution towards designing support systems that are as effective as possible for higher education initiatives for veterans that are increasingly funded by federal programs such as the “new G.I. Bill” – the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008.

Keywords

Veterans — Higher Education — PTSD

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Introduction

Obstacles to the integration of military veterans back into society merit more research than currently exists, especially as that transition pertains to emotional stability. After having served in combat zones, many veterans face Post Traumatic Stress and or physical injury [1]. These issues pertain to adjusting back into the civilian life, an activity that not only affects the veterans, but also family, friends and co-workers.

This issue has been ignored and downplayed for decades, resulting in a failure either to address or inform the public on how better to handle veterans suffering from psychological problems and integration issues. This is a broad topic that has a potentially large effect on the civilian community, the educational system, and the family household. In general, civilians do not know how to handle a veteran who returns to civilian life, resulting in many problems. Those symptoms include emotional outbursts, and rejection by children, or even spouses. Veterans may also view their community as hostile from the standpoint of having spent months in a strange, violent atmosphere abroad. Civilians who observe this behavior tend to act differently around these veterans in ways that are harmful to the success of reintegration. In addition, universities now faced with a huge number of transitioning

veterans into higher education are struggling to adapt to the needs of veterans, likely causing tension between faculty and staff towards this new category of students.

However, not enough research has been done to understand how to deal with this wide range of issues. Therefore, the majority of people who are involved in these circumstances do not have concrete answers on how to handle a situation. This is what I aim to explore and clarify by addressing the needs of veterans, allowing them to overcome integration barriers and move forward successfully.

Therefore, how can we help veterans integrate back into civilian life after military service? By interviewing veterans in the community, I aim to accumulate sufficient data to develop ideas about how we can better integrate veterans back into society. Once this information is collected it will be analyzed to see what problems veterans are facing in the community. This research will also investigate the broader problems veterans face after leaving military service. By interacting with veterans after leaving military service through interviews and surveys, we can use the information to meet the needs of the veterans. In gaining this firsthand knowledge we could create programs that veterans actually need rather than perpetuate misleading assumptions. Our doing so would eliminate significant friction between veterans and the community.

In the literature reviewed for this project the researchers try to concentrate on veterans' integrating into the education system, the family, and community from military service. These are three main paths veterans will take after leaving military service on their journey back to civilian life. Interviews, surveys, and secondary data analysis are key methods used by researchers to obtain the results they need in order give information on what should be done to help with the problems veterans are facing.

This research will examine past studies on veteran integration and identify patterns that have missed on what is causing some of the problems veterans are facing as they return to their home societies. In-depth interviews were conducted with ten student veterans to examine and obtain information on key problems that veterans are facing. Comparing statements made by veterans in these interviews led to key problems that stood out, along with explanations and ideas on how to help fix those.

1. Literature Review

In reviewing the literature, I found that past studies concentrated on veterans' integrating back into society through education, reuniting with family members or going back into the workforce in the community.

1.1 Integration into Education

The vast majority of veterans who leave military service will transition into some sort of higher-education program. This is due to the fact that most veterans are awarded a paid education through the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008—known as the Post-9/11 GI Bill—for their service to

their country. The following articles look at this factor and the problems that student veterans may face in a higher education environment.

In a study by Jones [2], the researcher used a phenomenological approach to learn how student veterans transitioned from active duty to a higher-education institution. To do this, the researcher studied three student veterans attending college full time. This protocol allowed Jones to conduct in-depth personal interviews at various times in the student veteran's academic year. The study produced three prominent findings: "the process of adapting a civilian identity, higher education's role in the civilian acculturation process, and the need for comprehensive services for veterans." These variables are relevant to my research because the results show how veterans struggle with adapting back to civilian life and with regulating their behavior in public. Each veteran also expressed the need for more services to help transition back into civilian life, especially on university campuses as pertains to the Post 9/11 GI Bill.

Another study, by O'Herrin [3], concentrates on ways to improve the educational experience of veterans who transition to a higher-education environment. The study discusses how only a small percentage of veterans use all the education benefits provided to them because either they do not know about certain programs or they fail to understand their purpose. This article is relevant to my research because it discusses the need to understand what veterans require in order to succeed in their quests for higher education—whether such assistance comes in the form of points of contacts, learning groups, or veteran-only classes.

The ASHE higher education report [4] wanted to look at the veterans' development of identity and the problems they may face today. The military maladapts a soldier's individual identity to the point where it identifies with group, rather than individual purpose. Therefore, when veterans leave the service they lose that group structured identity and now have to rely on an individual identity that they have not developed. This is causing a crisis in the veteran population with regard to self-purpose in life. The article is relevant to my research because it provides insight into the psychological development of a veteran returning to civilian life. Information like this can be used to help develop specific introductory classes to give veterans a foundation of "self."

Lastly, Smith-Osborne [1] examines how post-secondary education attainment among veterans affected their mental-health status. After interviewing the research subjects, the sponsors of the study found that the amount of help the veterans received from VA health care played a huge role in the state of mind of veterans toward their attainment of higher education. This is important to my research as it shows how different factors can influence some of the problems veterans may be facing when integrating back into education.

1.2 Integration Back into the Family

For the veterans who have families, integration back into a family setting trumps higher education as a first priority. After a soldier's long deployment, many families just want to be reunited with their loved ones and pick up where they left off. However, this is usually not that easy for the veterans, as time for them may have stopped back home, while the family's life moved forward. This is especially the case for veterans who have children, since military parents have often missed out on a lot of important events in the lives of their kids.

Makin-Byrd's research [5] examined how returning veterans integrate back into their families. The study wanted to focus on three different areas: the impact of military service on the veteran and the family, Veteran Health Administration policies and initiatives on evidenced-based practices for veterans and families, and recommendations for practicing psychologists. The study found that military service has a "myriad of physical and psychological consequences on the family." This helps my research by providing information about how to understand what veterans and their families go through upon returning home.

1.3 Integration Back into the Community

The final way veterans leave military service is to head straight back into the community. For those veterans who do not have a solid foundation or purpose after military service, this can sometimes be very challenging. Again, even though the veteran imagines nothing has changed back in their communities, time still moves on for the community and often what the veteran comes back to is a new environment. This could be new people in their community, changes in the landscape due to new buildings or buildings closing down. In many cases this can be extremely hard for the veteran.

The study by Messenger [6] wanted to explore the two emotional experiences of attention and hypervigilance of veterans. The researcher wanted to explore how veterans psychologically acted in the community after returning from military service since the first thing that changes when they join the service is their psychological state. It needs to fall into line with the tasks or situations they will face in the military. Such change, relative to adapting to new surroundings, is not always a bad thing. However, the training can make recruits extremely hypervigilant and cause veterans to become almost paranoid towards the public. This can then cause high anxiety in the veteran and almost disable them, to the point at which they cannot function appropriately. This is a key dimension of my research, as I explain how it is hard for veterans to transition back into the community after military service.

The main objective for Ahern [7] was to see how service members transitioned back into civilian life after serving in either Afghanistan or Iraq. The researchers looked at the connections they experienced with friends and family, as well as any changes in their home or social environment. At the end of the study the researchers found that veterans who help each other have a higher degree of success in transitioning

back into civilian life. Furthermore, the researchers suggest the need for a larger-scale study to better understand how to develop a peer-connection program as well as interventions to help other groups of veterans successfully transition back into civilian life. This is relevant to my research because it veterans understand the vast majority of issues they face upon returning to the community.

Finally, in a study by Sayer [8], researchers wanted to see the challenges veterans faced reintegrating back into their community. By using random veterans from VA health care participants, the researchers conducted a questionnaire for the veterans to answer about their experiences returning to the community. Results showed that veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder had a different experience than veterans without PTSD in returning to the community. This research was conducted over a large population. Such data stands to help my project by showing how community integration affected a large number of veterans.

2. Methods

After reviewing the articles I noticed that there were three primary approaches which the researchers used to collect the information for their studies. Some researchers chose to do interviews to collect their data; others opted to view secondary data to obtain the information they needed. Finally, a couple of studies used surveys to obtain information.

Among these approaches, I seek to follow an interview strategy similar to Ahern's (2015) qualitative study [7] framed by homecoming theory which involved in-depth interviews of 24 Afghanistan and Iraq veterans in 2009-2011, in California. Recruitment of the veterans for the interviews purposively included members of different sex, age, race/ethnicities as well as different services branches. Advertisement through organizations and events helped disseminate the study to the veterans.

The researchers did not recruit veterans based on their health problems; rather, veterans who were interested in the study contacted them for further information. Veterans were given the option to do an in-person or over-the-phone interview and were offered a gift card as an incentive for them to undertake the interview. Informed consent was given to veteran before they interviewed. Afterwards, the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects at the University of California, Berkeley, validated the process.

2.1 Data Sources

To identify and learn more about problems that past research had revealed on veteran integration back into society, I conducted in-depth interviews with ten student veterans from the University of North Texas campus. The interviews consisted of several thought-provoking questions that engaged the interviewees in providing useful information. Each interviewee is informed about what and why this research is being conducted before the interview starts; each had the choice to opt out of the interview session if they feel their rights might be

violated in anyway. These steps followed a protocol approved by the University of North Texas Institutional Review Board to ensure that I did do anything to violate the rights of the participants.

Each interviewee was recorded during each interview to ensure the accuracy of their answers, which will be used later in the research process. The interviews will be held on the UNT campus in the Student Veteran Service office to help the student veterans feel relaxed, as they are in a familiar safe place for them. One of the biggest concerns I had was that of finding student veterans willing to participate in the research study. Many veterans tend to go out of their way to avoid being bothered by outside people or organizations. My being a student veteran made it easier for them to talk to me and feel relaxed. Getting the veteran to relax is very important, as it will determine degrees of openness during the interview process.

2.2 Analysis

Once the information was been obtained from the in-depth interviews, I then listened to each one taking notes on any key themes or ideas presented. Next, I reviewed and coded each interview and compared the results from each interview in order to identify any patterns that may have emerged from the sessions as a whole. If any key patterns stood out, I took the time to explain what they were and summarize ideas on how to address the problems revealed. This will hopefully help resolve some of the issues that veterans are facing while trying to reintegrate back into society after finishing their military service.

2.3 Study Participants

The following results are from analyzing the ten in-depth interviews from student veterans on the University of North Texas campus. The findings will be presented in order of importance with regard to some of the issues veterans confront while trying to integrate back into society following military service. While many patterns and concerns were present, I will concentrate on the most common ones.

Table 1. Study Participants: Descriptive Statistics

Subject Name	Gender	Service Branch	Deployed?
Mike	M	Marines	No
Jessica	F	Navy	Contracted
John	M	Army	Yes
Sam	M	Army	Yes
Will	M	Army	Yes
Robert	M	Marines	Yes
George	M	Navy	Yes
Kyle	M	Marines	Yes
Alberto	M	Army	Yes
Richard	M	Army	Yes

The interviewees for the research project are listed below in Table 1 and each interviewees were given alias names to

protect their identities. There were nine white males and one female ranging in ages from 25 to 35 years of age. Of the ten interviewees, five served in the Army, two were in the Marines, two were in the Navy and one person served in the Marines and the Army. In addition, eight of the ten student veterans have been deployed in a combat zone and one went back to Afghanistan as a contract worker.

3. Findings

The following issues have been identified from in-depth interviews with student veterans from the University of North Texas. Each problem was recognized from coding the interviews' key points and comparing across each session to see if there are any common patterns. Figure 1 summarizes the major issues prominent from the interviewees' responses.

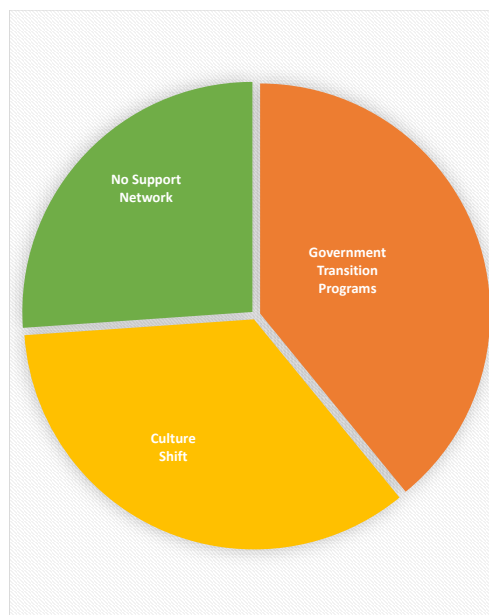


Figure 1. Three Major Issues Mentioned by Interviewees

As one can see from Figure 1, three key themes emerged from the interview sessions with the student veterans. I shall focus primarily on their complaints that were directly linked to government transition programs before I briefly discuss the culture shift and lack of a support network.

3.1 Government Transition Programs

The biggest complaint from all the interviewees in regard to integrating back into society from military service was the lack of information they obtained when leaving the armed forces.

Every veteran is required to go through a transitioning program when it is their time to leave military service and return to civilian society. However, all the interviewees expressed that the transitioning programs are not at all informative. In fact, Will states that “they don’t meet the transitioning soldiers’ needs.” Figure 2 below shows the main issues veterans see with the government transitioning programs.

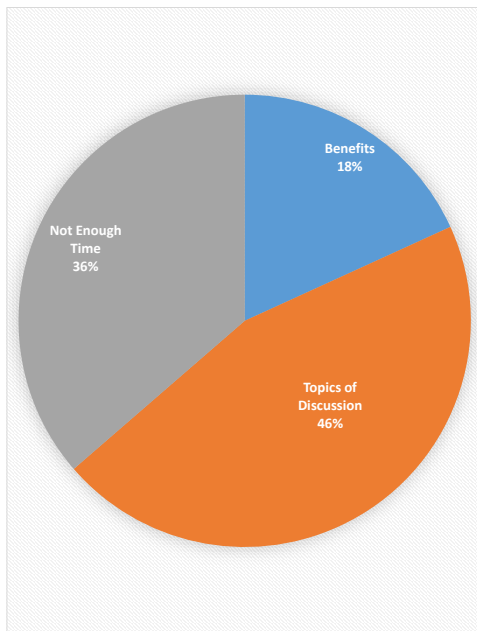


Figure 2. Major Complaints about Government Transition Programs

3.2 Benefits

This is primarily due to the fact that the transition programs mainly address how a veteran should prepare their resume in order to get a job outside of the military. In most cases the interviewees expressed that, in addition to resume preparing, the transition programs mainly concentrated on how a veteran should apply for their benefits after leaving service—whether for health-related issues or for financial and educational assistance. Although learning about benefits is a good thing, as expressed by the student veterans, they also pointed out that the information provided about benefits was not detailed enough. John points out “I was unsure how the school system works,” an issue that many of the other veterans found hard to understand as well. This calls into question what is being told to the veterans at these transitioning programs as they seem not to understand the information they are provided.

3.3 Topics of Discussion

However, most of the student veterans expressed that it would have been nice to know other things besides how to apply for a job or benefits. Many interviewees expressed the need for the military to prepare future veterans for the obligations they will face upon leaving service. Mainly it would be useful to concentrate on how to pay bills, find an apartment, and many of the little things to which everyday civilians are accustomed, such as applying for a driver’s license. The student veterans explained to me that many of them joined straight out of high school and never needed to do any of these everyday civilian tasks, as everything was provided to them such as housing and food by the government. This lack of information on how to live as a civilian is a major issue in veterans trying to transition back into civilian life and often times is a huge stressor that hinders a veteran from moving on and succeeding in post-military life.

3.4 Not Enough Time

Another big complaint from the student veterans is not having enough time in the government transitioning programs. Some of the student veterans pointed out that one is supposed to have ample time in their processing out of the military; still, they did not receive this. Mike states that “there was a big push to get you out the door, but won’t let you go until you sign this paperwork”—paperwork which was a checklist that veterans must go through in order to be released from the military. This checklist usually included going to do a physical or a mental health check—for which many veterans will give false information so they can simply leave after having just arrived, in some cases, from a long deployment.

In some cases, due to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, deployments were at a high number and the government transitioning programs were done prior to deployment in order to save time when the soldiers got back. An issue that Robert said “was a waste of my time because I did it before I deployed, and after my 14-month deployment they wouldn’t let us take it again.” The student veterans pointed out that they wanted to learn more and are supposed to have enough time to do so, but due to the war’s time constraints were put in place to keep everything moving along.

3.5 Culture Shift and Lack of a Support Network

Although the focus of this paper is on government transition programs, I will briefly address two other factors that were frequently discussed by student veterans.

An issue that has been commonly identified by past research is the culture shift veterans face when trying to integrate back into society. As Kyle states “being in the military you get used to a certain structure and it doesn’t work like that in the outside world.” This is primarily due to the fact that most of the veterans expressed that they have nothing in common with other civilians. Although all the veterans assured me that they feel supported by the community, it is hard for them to interact with other students as there is a maturity gap between the two groups.

Not having people to talk to and understand the issues that they were experiencing was a major concern addressed by the student veterans. This is a new experience as in the military recruits had a support group or a circle of friends they could rely on to help get through any problems. In addition to feeling isolated, a couple of the veterans expressed the health issues they now face after military service, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, making it very difficult for them to interact in society. This is due to the fact of having to deal with the stressors of worrying about being in a crowded place or dealing with noises that remind them of being in a combat zone. These stressors are causing the student veterans to not want to participate in society, which is causing them further social problems as they try to integrate back into the civilian world.

4. Conclusion

With the winding down of the wars overseas in the Middle East, hundreds of thousands of men and women military persons are coming home to integrate back into society. Many face problems in doing so because, as researchers argue, of health concerns experienced by the veteran. This has been proven to be true in most cases, but not all.

The answers found in this research show that integration problems can be caused by something besides health issues. It can be due to the fact that many veterans are ill prepared to transition back into society—a problem that originates at the exit point of military service. The military trains a person to enter the branch of service for which they enlisted, but not for a constructive exist. The military has a portion of participants made up of young people who have never experienced society as an adult civilian. When they finally get the chance, they have no knowledge about mundane things that people their age should know.

This is an issue that needs to be addressed at the military level. Yes, it is important to know how to apply for certain benefits or how to get a job, but before one does that one must know how to live in a new world to which they are unaccustomed; how to find a place to live or how to pay bills, things that their government had provided for them for years. These are the topics that need to be addressed on a priority basis. However, nothing can be done to address these issues unless the military reconsiders the assumption that a veteran is no longer their problem once they leave their service. What is in order is a helping hand to the door, and beyond. This information provided in the research was from student veterans who finished their service years ago. Therefore further research must be done to see if the same pattern is occurring today with present-day veterans transitioning back to civilian life.

Author Biography

At the age of 17, Jeremy Buchanan enlisted in the Army and served for four years, including one tour in Iraq in 2008-2009. In 2010, he was honorably discharged from military service.

He recently graduated from the University of North Texas with a BA in Arts and Science with a concentration in Sociology. Jeremy plans to pursue his passion of helping veterans to adjust back to civilian life. He hopes that his experience and knowledge with veterans will prove beneficial in helping those in need.

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