

“There is a lot of self-reliance”:  
Modern Military Veterans and the Challenge of  
Effective Transition from Soldier to Student  
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Even in the most remote part of the world, wherever there are American soldiers, news of educational planning and benefits during the postwar era has been disseminated...educators... would find surveys of opinions of military personnel of great value in determining their postwar needs and facilitating their postwar adjustments.

—Nathan S. Washton

Queens College Professor of Education Nathan S. Washton has written extensively on the topic of science education, including a short article in *The Journal of Higher Education* highlighting the challenges facing troops returning from active combat deployments. Washton opines that it is veterans, as well as teachers with military experience, who should have an active role in creating dynamic environments that emphasize collaborative learning, community involvement, professional development, and holistic, solution-driven educational outcomes. “The veteran as a student should be encouraged and stimulated in his educative process,” Washton notes. Continuing, Washton claims, “Such interest could be developed and fostered. . . by utilizing veteran experiences wherever applicable and by the personality of the professor who can make the subject live.” Doing so, Washton asserts, will allow the veteran to “demonstrate his proficiency in the mastery of life” as well as in the framework of formal education (226). The mission for colleges and universities, then, seems clear to Washton, himself a veteran: interview returning soldiers as they begin their university lives. Listen to them. Reflect on their experiences and anticipate their forthcoming challenges. Implement anticipatory changes that are practicable, useful, and centered. The task list is not insurmountable, and the results for

veterans could be transformative. Washton's tight prose almost sings with optimism.

Washton published his piece in 1945, in the waning months of World War II. It is against this backdrop of immense geopolitical change that he envisioned the veteran as an agent of progress in university settings. It is in this same setting, a cultural landscape of postwar tension and uncertainty about 45,000 American troops returning from a hostile terrain against a common enemy, and a significant number of these newest veterans will emerge on a new, equally unfamiliar territory—the college campus—that continues to struggle with their needs (Thompson 35). *The New York Times* reported in April 2012 that as many as 600,000 veterans who qualify for benefits under the Post-9/11 GI Bill may be entering colleges and universities around the country for the Fall 2012 semester (“A Good Education”). The funding these student-veterans and their beneficiaries would bring to higher educational institutions could amount to nine billion dollars in Veterans' Administration expenditures. It would appear, from the conversations overheard in veterans' lounges, counselors' offices, and classrooms, that the highly idiosyncratic position of the veteran among nonveterans in university settings is a continuing dilemma, one that is only going to pull more gravitational weight on university and VA resources in the next five years. Whether these institutions can stay on axis while meeting student-veterans' needs is a policy dilemma that is ripe for creative solutions.

In that vein, this essay will take a two-pronged approach to the problem. First, the challenges facing veterans as they transition to university life will be explored through the findings of the educators, psychologists, social workers, and other clinicians working with this diverse population. Secondly, two veterans' experiences of moving from the military to a state university are highlighted as a means of giving real voices to the data. There is an urgency with which universities must construct academic programming and social support systems in order to fully integrate these valuable student assets into the community of

learners. The tension is that the university should, ideally, do so while honoring the veterans' particularly distinct journey through human development and experience.

Colleges and universities, then, must proactively address a variety of issues for the men and women who will be walking through the schoolhouse doors. High-quality, front-line data collection using strategically designed surveys, developmentally appropriate writing assessments, and interviews can help capture information about veterans and guide policy as well as instruction. Ultimately, the university needs to know who the veteran is as a learner; using a model like Gardner's Multiple Intelligences can offer descriptive flexibility for intake assessors, faculty, and students (Gardner xi). It would also be useful to ascertain what instructional techniques veterans find engaging and which they consider redundant or, even worse, pedantic. Investigating assessment models that are truly meaningful for veterans is key; many are used to obtain frequent, definitive assessment in their previous training and in their jobs. Perhaps most difficult, faculty must recognize, appreciate, and respond to the modern veterans' socioemotional experiences of war without simultaneously infantilizing them. Veterans who sense that academia regards them as broken, willfully nonconformist, or unworkable in the college environment will react with understandable frustration, which puts them at risk for attrition. In 2012, as in 1945, the veteran remains a college's first and best source for information, guidance, and direction.

Clearly, there can be no valid claim that higher education has done nothing to prepare for the arrival of veterans in its classrooms. Many two-year and four-year institutions have been endeavoring to manage funding supports, counseling, social networking, academic resources, and professional exposure for veterans. *Campus Legal Advisor* advised its readership in 2007 that combat veterans from Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) were going to need intensive assistance coordinating their new lives as students,

particularly if they suffer from Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and/or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and in addition to “student” are managing another new, much more unwelcome and problematic identity: “disabled” (“Gear Up” 4). Veterans may be reluctant to discuss the details of their service history with university officials, even trained veterans’ counselors (who may have service histories themselves), and may forego partnering with an institution’s disability service providers in an attempt to manage their transition problems privately (4). Even students who do reach out to veterans’ offices and utilize all available resources struggle with coexisting in classrooms with peers who may be the same age, but who are developmentally unable to establish parity with their veteran counterparts; the deeply complex socioemotional issues facing older combat veterans cannot be viewed as analogous to the adjustment difficulties of the traditionally-aged student body (Mangan and Wright A1). This sense of separateness between the student-veteran and the rest of the student body must be acknowledged openly by administrators and faculty so that appropriate planning for large numbers of veterans on campus can be facilitated.

It is no secret in the veteran community that PTSD with or without the comorbidity of TBI may, in fact, be the fundamental injury of the OIF/OEF conflicts. In 2010, Glover-Graf, Miller, and Freeman noted that OIF/OEF veterans facing a battery of health concerns—physical, cognitive and mental—struggle with depression, adjustment disorders, and substance abuse, and that even the most responsive and sensitive university faculty and staff can be overwhelmed by the complexity of veterans’ needs (43). PTSD in particular is hidden, chronic, and debilitating; recovery time for PTSD may be as long as seven years. Indeed, some symptoms may exist for the rest of a veteran’s life, ebbing and flowing as stressors emerge and eclipse over time (Glover-Graf, Miller, and Freeman 44). Superimposing, then, a student-veteran’s extended recovery time from this disorder with the ordinary stresses of a university educational program may exacerbate the signature symptoms of PTSD:

experiencing difficulty with memory and concentration, responding inappropriately to social cues, showing poor relationships with authority figures, and facing challenges with aggressiveness, all of which make it difficult, if not impossible, in negotiating the complicated social and intellectual structure of the college classroom (Church 47). One Navy student-veteran who self-reported experiencing anxiety in lecture-hall environments notes, “When you pull into port . . . terrorism is so high, you are always super vigilant at all times. In these 300-person lecture halls, you are just surrounded by people you don’t know” (Wallis 1). Perhaps this type of en masse educational environment is so socially counterproductive to veterans and comparable learners that alternative settings—smaller classes with a functional mix of students for whom the lecture hall is simply unworkable—could be explored by universities.

Student Veterans of America, a nonprofit whose mission is to provide military veterans with the resources, support, and advocacy needed to succeed in higher education and following graduation, has noted that colleges and universities across the board are doing about a “C+” job of creating academic and social supports for the latest wave of veterans, and the gaps are showing (Wallis 1). Faculty who fail to engage student-veterans on a developmentally meaningful level, who show disregard for fundamental classroom management, or who do not clarify course expectations and outcomes may find themselves the recipients of student-veterans’ ire; staff who appear bureaucratic and inflexible may receive the same generalized disdain.

One way for colleges and universities to alleviate the anxiety of student-veterans entering higher education is to train faculty to purposefully design curricula that engages these learners across multiple domains that emphasize equality, excellence, and diversity (Branker 60). Using the steps of strategic curriculum design—which include identification of challenges, testing solutions, evaluating practicability, and only then implementing workable options—faculty can create “barrier free learning and social environments that create value and

enhance the student veterans' experiences requiring fewer adaptations and accommodations" (Branker 61). However, the lynch pin in this type of design is the testing phase; running multiple pilot programs within the university may be necessary to massage out the many levels of academic and social needs that veterans bring with them to campus. Not all of these pilot programs will yield enough data or generalizable findings to be added as permanent items in an overall campus educational policy for student-veterans. However, it is the willingness of faculty and administration to be part of the innovative, purposeful, and emergent frontier of curriculum design that will at least provide an academic and social safety net for those student-veterans who show initial reticence to explore their new terrain. Without the recognition that student-veterans are inherently different from other students while at the same time deserving of anticipatory planning by administrators and faculty alike, the level of success these men and women have already demonstrated in their service lives will not be surpassed in the classroom, and their years of training, skill, and achievement will reach a disappointing anticlimax.

### *Student-Veteran Profile #1*

MA1 joined the Marine Corps in January 2004 at age nineteen. He was a high school graduate working as an electrician's apprentice when he entered the Delayed Entry program and went to boot camp later that spring. At his suburban Cleveland-area high school, he earned, by his own admission, "straight Cs," although during his junior/senior year he took a construction class in which he excelled. He struggled with algebra and calculus, but he showed great aptitude for trigonometry and geometry. A naturally curious child, he learned to read by age four, although he did not show particularly high performance in the elementary grades or high school. He attributes this disconnect to a lack of direction in general, not a lack of inquisitiveness about academic pursuits. During

his recruitment process, he scored well on the ASVAB (“They Said”) and elected to train as a nuclear weapons security guard.

MA1 served five years in the Marine Corps, seven months of which comprised his boot camp, infantry training, and specialized training necessary for his job in the security forces. He was promoted to E-4 before his service ended. He found that the training for the security guard position emphasized being able to quickly comprehend written procedure and policy—in his own words, “the manual read like stereo instructions”—but in his estimation the best training for his position and others like it is hands-on. However, MA1 also categorized himself as a “constant” reader during his service; he enjoyed reading fiction, but he was also aware of non-fiction applicable to his particular station as a Marine. Of particular interest was Grossman’s *On Killing*, which MA1 described as coming to him from other “enlightened Marines,” especially his squad leader, whom MA1 affectionately referred to as “an intellectual”:

He was the type who . . . he’d be reading these big books about different ways of thinking, thinking outside the box . . . he was the guy who got me exposed to it, influenced me about moving forward.

MA1 entered college at age 24. As an electrical engineering major at a northeastern Ohio state school, his grade point average had been 4.0. The decision-making process he went through in picking his major was, by his own admission, grounded in seeking a challenge:

I was on this kick where, I had just made it through the Marines, and I thought, I want to try something else like this, you know, I want to pick something I don’t think I can do and see how it all works out. So I picked electrical engineering because they said it’s one of the most difficult degrees to get around here. I just have a talent for it, I guess.

The emotional confidence MA1 gained in the Marine Corps transferred over to a procedure with which many students struggle: choosing a major, which MA1

saw as really choosing a life, one with both economic and social rewards far beyond what he felt he could have achieved prior to his service.

MA1 placed into English 101 for his first university-level English course. His teacher told him, in his words, that he “wrote like a god.” He found that his writing topics tended to focus on war and military stories, and he enjoyed the logical process of writing. He credits his experience in the Marines as fundamental to his development as a thinker. He received an A in his English course, which “surprised” him, since he was initially intimidated by college writing courses. He felt like an “intellectual weakling” compared to his peers, but when the challenges of university academics started rolling towards him, he put aside his self-esteem and self-efficacy issues and developed successful strategies for meeting standards and, in many respects, exceeding them. He also earned an A in his English 102 course, but he found that the topics the professor chose to address in the syllabus were highly gendered and clearly geared towards addressing the needs of the women in the class. MA1 also noted that when his peers self-selected writing topics, their choices—drugs, drinking—were simply not interesting to him.

I wanted to write about, you know, current affairs, something going on in the world, something relevant, and you’ve got a bunch of kids who played beer pong and nothing else going on in their lives . . . just kind of dumb stuff. I don’t know how you can expand on drinking or drugs . . . it kept me alienated . . . my writing ability was better than theirs . . . they couldn’t relate to me.

MA1’s dissociation from his peers increased his anxiety during his first year, although not enough to put him at risk of dropping out. He did note that he could envision a situation in which struggling veterans would avoid addressing anxiety about school by simply withdrawing from classes.

When describing his learning style, MA1 revealed that he is by nature a “tinkerer,” that he enjoys self-described “nerd kits,” building electronic circuit

boards, working on cars, and pushing the creative limits of engineering, “creating something out of nothing.” He finds that he is able to “tinker” in one area—his engineering courses, for example—and then move the applicable skills and problem solving across domains to other academic areas. MA1 may well be a high-functioning right-brained learner; to paraphrase neuroscientist Jill Bolte Taylor, MA1 thinks in pictures. He learns through movement (“Jill Bolte”). He worked well with models and exemplars in his service training, but noted that his English courses in particular either did not use rubrics for assessment or he did not receive them back as part of the evaluation process. If he had, he would have used them as a learning tool for the next writing project as well as models for other writing-based projects. He also found using outlines useful in his writing process, because it allowed him to stay focused and meet standards in a time-effective way.

MA1 remarked that, in his estimation, the three needs he has identified as a veteran that would make the difference between a high level of success in English courses and mediocre performance would include

A lot of practice. That’s the only way we learn anything in the military. A lot of opportunities to write. Being assessed constantly. In the military, if you messed up on something, somebody’s going to tell you. They’re not trying to hurt your feelings or anything . . . it’s more like constructive criticism, you know, give it a shot and see how it turns out. Being given careful instruction, break it down step by step.

The strategic design model promoted by Branker would meet this identified need. A course designed with periodic assessment that models a “go/no go” standard—meeting standards and moving forward with a project or revising it until it rises to the level of acceptability—may give veterans the type of instructional input to which they can respond meaningfully while monitoring their own learning.

MA1 noted that while he had not been diagnosed with PTSD, he had experienced concerns about anger and had sought treatment before enrolling in

college. He received a 20% disability rating from the Veterans' Administration. He experiences a certain level of resentment towards his nonveteran peers who "stayed home and had fun while everybody else was deployed." He also expressed difficulty with being assessed by graduate assistants rather than professors. He used as his example his struggle to parlay his writing skills in the liberal arts to a physics lab; the graduate assistants gave him "scathing" comments on his lab notes, yet he noted that they did not provide him with examples of what they wanted in terms of format or style. "Truthfully," he noted, "I blew them off. I was being graded by a T.A. I didn't take it to heart." He takes the remarks of professors very seriously because he sees them as "passionate" about their art. T.A.'s, he observed, "are my age or younger, so I didn't regard them as being authorities . . . they don't have doctorates or graduate training beyond where they are right now . . . I can't take them seriously." MA1 also noted that standard English grammar is not as emphasized in the military as in other contexts, and that even veterans who are used to writing high-level orders and documents may struggle to incorporate formal writing styles into their extant skills. If instructors—whether they be full professors, adjunct instructors, or teaching assistants—aren't aware of this discrepancy, their evaluation of the English language skills of veterans is likely to reflect a perceived deficiency. Instead, only some corrective advice about academic writing standards would have been warranted, without falling prey to stereotypes about veterans' academic acumen.

In addition to his course load, MA1 is currently employed as a technical support professional for a large Cleveland-based company. He senses a definite difference between his problem-solving and information processing abilities and those of his same-age, non-veteran peers; he sees them as unfocused thinkers, unable to prioritize information and disseminate it effectively.

In the military, there is a lot of self-reliance. The Marine Corps' thinking was, if I had a sergeant who was above me, and something happened to

him or he was incapacitated, then I'm the leader. If something happens to me, then the next guy has to step up . . . know your job, know the job of the person in front of you. The time may come where you are by yourself and you have to take care of business.

Ironically, it is this very mindset—that he is essentially alone in the university environment, and therefore very much taking care of his own business—that seemed to guide MA1, and even haunt him. He was a man among like-minded men, yet segregated emotionally and socially from even many veteran peers. The necessity for the university to ease this burden of seclusion among and between modern veterans is growing, and its emergence cannot be overstated.

In the final analysis, MA1 found that his experience as a Marine was essential to his development as a learner. As a child, he wasn't pushed to excel in academics, and that lack of direction carried through his adolescence. He wanted the intellectual and social tools that the Marines offered; he now sees his experience in college as an extension of the desire to excel that the Marines instilled in him. Moreover, MA1's military experience has become a fundamental of his young adult life, and he mourns the loss of his Marine life not unlike a widower grieving the loss of his life partner: "I loved it . . . I hit my element there . . . more time is passing between my life now and my experiences then . . . there is a grief about it."

### *Student-Veteran Profile #2*

MA2 entered the Marine Corps at age twenty-one. There are some similarities between MA2 and MA1 as they individually prepared for service. They were both early, confident readers; each decided in high school to enter the military; and each did well on the ASVAB. Unlike MA1, who struggled through formal education, MA2's high school performance at a Cleveland-area boys' high school was excellent and he was honor-tracked throughout his four years there. He noted that in the all-boys school, there was "a lot of male ego" involved

among the students and that when he let his plans to enter the military be known, he received support from peers and teachers. MA2 was also distinct from MA1 in that his family was supportive of his decision to enter the Marine Corps; the men in his family, he noted, “go into the service and then become cops.” MA2’s intellectual drive led him in a very different direction; despite having no previous experience with Altaic language families, MA2 trained as a Korean cryptological linguist and achieved the rank of E-5 (Sergeant) within four years:

I was cross-trained as a regular intelligence analyst . . . using technology to “find the enemy” and assessing what to do about it . . . and then advising my superiors on best practices and best ideas . . . I went to Defense Language Institute in Monterey for 63 weeks to learn Korean, reading, writing and speaking. It’s very intense.

MA2 felt that his early, positive experiences with reading and writing contributed to his success in his cryptology training and that his stability as a Marine in this highly skilled arena was buoyed by his ability to self-assess his learning.

He deployed to Ramadi, Iraq, for ten months in 2009, where he worked in intelligence and spent his off-duty time reading sports nonfiction and true crime stories. A sergeant, he “loved” his leadership role, and recognized that he was in charge of his platoon’s lives, not just the quality of their job performance. In his position, he postured himself as less of a micromanager and more of a facilitator: “I wanted to trust my guys more and give them responsibility. I wanted to help them grow up . . . I never yelled at anybody, I never berated anybody . . . I wanted to teach them something.” His approach to learning within the confines of the military mirrors his attitude about learning in college—that leaders teach by example and that these memes impact the environment in tangible, often permanent ways.

One element of MA2’s cultural experience in his competitive high school, the expectation of a college degree, became a realistic outcome when he entered a northeastern Ohio state university at age twenty-six. He had made several

attempts to complete online college courses over the term of his enlistment, but logistical and paperwork challenges during his deployment made completion of the courses difficult. His university credited him with 49 credit hours from the Marine Corps, which put him squarely in sophomore year, and he declared an English and creative writing major. He envisioned himself going to law school, likely at the same university he attends for his undergraduate program, and aspired to work in some type of legal environment where he could use his leadership skills to help others as a policy advocate.

Despite not having had a formal English writing course for almost eight years, MA2 earned an A in English 101. He was the oldest student in the class and the only veteran; he surmised that perhaps he was the only student who had traveled outside of Ohio. His life experience, then, put him at odds intellectually with other students:

It was not really a writing class, I'd say. It was more geared towards discussion, world views . . . I totally monopolized that class. It was just me and the instructor talking the entire time. I was the only one with any kind of knowledge about what was going on in the world or politics.

MA2 thought that his experience in the military had been valued by his instructors and peers, although he sensed that his fellow students had more of a caricature of him as a “Marine” rather than seeing him as an individual. “I try to hide it, but it comes out . . . but it’s never been detrimental or negative.” He observed that the tone of whether other students accept having a veteran in the classroom was completely dependent on the attitude of the instructor. This insight—that the individual professor, not peers, sets the tone for student-veterans’ social acceptance in the higher education classroom—was both startling and revealing. It provides an avenue by which universities can create policy and coach faculty on how to plan for veterans’ presence in their courses.

Because of his performance in English 101, MA2 was waived from having to take English 102. He has taken other content-area courses in English, including

Introduction to Poetry, Introduction to Creative Nonfiction, and Introduction to Creative Writing. In his English courses, he wasn't been exposed to a teaching methodology that focused on rubrics. He didn't necessarily find that problematic as long as he could measure for himself a learning curve. While MA1 emphasized application learning as significant for him, MA2 didn't rely on those concrete learning experiences in order to internalize concepts. It would be a mistake, then, to generalize all military "types" as concrete learners. Despite his own more esoteric learning style, MA2 recognized the propensity for military training to emphasize a kinesthetic learning style above all others as a means to meet the requirements of many military jobs.

MA2 noted that the absence of camaraderie in the university environment is the hardest aspect of the transition from his service to student life. He succinctly observed, "College is probably the most selfish environment you could ever encounter." He found it difficult to reconcile that there is no socially imposed impetus to help out another student who was struggling academically or socially; there is no demand that any one person look beyond his or her needs and reach out to coach another student. This differed dramatically from his military experience, in which there was an "instant response to help another guy out." However, when asked if a student-veteran cohort model would be beneficial as a university policy (where student-veterans would have the option of taking first-year courses with other veterans while receiving social and emotional supports), MA2 expressed concern that that type of model "would be a crutch. It would not help the transition that much. I think about a motto we used the Marine Corps, 'adapt and overcome.' I think [the model] would enable veterans to not adapt."

MA2 doesn't necessarily feel that the Marine Corps was, for him, the time in his life where he was at his personal best; while MA1 reflected on the Corps as being where he achieved more for himself than he thought possible, MA2 was more pragmatic:

I served my time, which is something in my eyes something you should do, you should serve your country. It did boost my confidence . . . for guys, we have these dreams of being a war hero . . . saving the country. I did my service in a completely different manner . . . especially after they got bin Laden, that made me proud . . . I was really proud of my service because that was clearly an intelligence driven mission . . . I insist that I could have done battles, war . . . I just wasn't given that opportunity, so there is something missing there for me.

MA2 saw the university and his unfolding education as the means by which he could perhaps fill that “something missing” in his adult life; he was less nostalgic about time passing since his enlistment ended. His transition has been emotionally easier than MA1's, but no less fraught with the same overall uncertainty about how well understood student-veterans and their needs are by peers, faculty and administrators.

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The task of planning for an unprecedented surge of modern student-veterans across American campuses is breathtaking in its complexity. The factors for which higher education must account when evaluating the needs of recent veterans—emotional, social, intellectual, organizational—are individually worthy of extensive research, policymaking, funding, and programming. In concert, they create a wholly new and previously untested paradigm that requires innovative, functional and student-centered curriculum design as well as evidence-based input from the wide array of clinicians who serve this highly specialized population. Perhaps the key element to the success of any university program is clear, unfettered qualitative data gathered from student-veterans themselves; observable trends about veterans from veterans must be analyzed as central to any intervention or strategy a university implements. Sixty-seven years after Nathan S. Washton opined about veterans' needs in higher education, higher education has an unprecedented chance to finally bring his vision to practice. It is

an opportunity the academy cannot waste; it is an occasion in which it can rise to greatness, to serve those who have greatly given in selfless service.

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