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Experiences of Veterans Transitioning to Postsecondary Education

Brian T. Gregg, Dana M. Howell, Anne Shordike

MeSH TERMS

- adaptation, psychological
- social adjustment
- social identification
- social support
- students
- veterans

An increasing number of U.S. military veterans are entering postsecondary education with problems attributed to deployed military service. The primary objective of this research was to describe the lived experiences of student veterans transitioning from active military service to postsecondary education. Phenomenological interviews were performed with 13 student veterans who had transitioned from military deployment to postsecondary education. An overall essential meaning of “emerging in college culture” was manifested from three themes, supported by rich textural and structural descriptions of student veterans’ experiences: (1) repurposing military experiences for life as a student veteran, (2) reconstructing civilian identity, and (3) navigating postsecondary context and interactions. These findings highlight implications that may facilitate occupational therapists’ efforts in supporting the needs of student veterans.

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More than 500,000 post-9/11-era U.S. military veterans have transitioned to postsecondary education (McBain, Kim, Cook, & Snead, 2012), with university enrollment rates projected to increase as the U.S. Department of Defense systematically downsizes (Ellison et al., 2012). In a survey of more than 1,800 veterans, 44% reported difficulty transitioning to civilian life, with the most likely problems to be strains on family life, outbursts of anger, post-traumatic stress, and loss of interest in daily activities (Morin, 2011). This survey suggested long-term consequences of combat exposure that may have an impact on veterans’ ability to transition to postsecondary education. Veteran transition studies have highlighted factors that veterans perceive as influencing their reintegration into the civilian community (Stiglitz & Blimes, 2008).

Veterans feel underprepared for academia. This feeling stems from the perception that they have lost time serving in the military (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009). Veterans enrolled in postsecondary education often do not graduate or take longer to graduate than traditional-age students (Cate, 2014; Wood, 2012). Veterans also struggle with the psychosocial effects of war and fitting in on campus (Ackerman et al., 2009). A common theme reported in student veteran studies is difficulty connecting socially with the university and other students (Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Garza-Mitchell, 2008; Jones, 2013).

DiRamio et al. (2008) theorized that student veterans cope with transitions by moving into the military, through deployments, out of the military, and back into education. Their investigation suggested that veterans experience issues with “relearning study skills, connecting with peers, and dealing with financial concerns” that require a transition coach to serve as a holistic liaison between the veteran and the university (DiRamio et al., 2008, p. 97). The coping process is multifaceted and further complicated when veterans enter postsecondary education with a disability. Limited research exists on wounded

warriors enrolled in postsecondary education, although in a cross-sectional study, 90% of student veterans' self-reported disabilities consisted of psychological, mobility, and learning disabilities (Vance & Miller, 2009).

Two studies have explored the intersection of occupation and veterans in transition. In a cross-sectional study, 30 veterans found that building relationships with people outside of the military environment and transitioning to the student role were difficult (Plach & Sells, 2013). Tomar and Stoffel (2014) performed a photovoice study of 2 student veterans' experiences in postsecondary education and suggested that the transition consists of a trajectory of life experiences influenced by context and temporal factors of the university environment. Overall, the body of research describing veterans' transitions to postsecondary education is limited in scope, which is of particular concern given the anticipated increase in veterans entering postsecondary education (Ackerman et al., 2009; Ellison et al., 2012). Therefore, this qualitative study aimed to answer the question "What are the lived experiences of discharged combat veterans transitioning to the occupation of education?" Given this aim, we were able to understand (1) veterans' attitudes when transitioning, (2) reasons veterans reported for using their post-9/11 GI Bill benefits, (3) social support used by veterans who were transitioning, (4) veterans' attitudes toward the military as they transitioned, and (5) veterans' perspectives on relationships with their peers at the university.

Method

A descriptive phenomenological approach was chosen for this study because it assumes that the phenomenon studied explicates an experience that participants mutually share

(Lincoln & Guba, 1989; Patton, 2002). Moreover, phenomenology describes lived human experiences on the basis of the principle that scientific knowledge begins with unbiased descriptions of the subject matter (Wertz, 2005). This study was approved by the University of Kentucky institutional review board, and all participants provided informed consent. All research took place at a large land grant university in the southern region of the United States.

Recruitment

The researchers used a purposive sample comparable to the active military population (U.S. Department of Defense, 2012); 85% of the sample was male ($n = 9$), and 15% was female ($n = 4$). All the participants were undergraduate students. All but 1 participant self-identified as White. Seven participants were active in the university's local Student Veterans Association, and 12 were active with the university's Veterans Resource Center (VRC). Table 1 summarizes participant characteristics. Student veterans met inclusion criteria for the study if they were (1) actively enrolled in the university, (2) between age 20 and 45 yr, and (3) no more than 5 yr removed from a combat tour. Participants were excluded if they were currently serving as an active-duty service member.

Email notifications were sent through university VRC email groups, and recruitment posters were displayed at the VRC. Volunteers from a previous survey study conducted by the primary investigator (Gregg) were also contacted. Snowball sampling was incorporated by asking interview participants to deliver recruitment flyers to other veterans. This method was instrumental in reaching student veterans who did not use the VRC and those who routinely concealed their veteran status to blend in (DiRamio et al., 2008).

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	Gender	Age, yr	Race	Service Branch	Military Component	No. of Dep	Dep Length, mo	VSA	VRC
Andre	M	28	White	Army	A	1	15	Y	Y
Andy	M	22	White	Army	NG	1	13	Y	Y
Brad	M	29	White	Marines	A	2	12, 6	Y	Y
Evan	M	27	White	Army	NG	1	9	N	Y
James	M	24	African American	Marines	A	1	7	N	Y
Jason	M	27	White	Army	R	1	12	Y	Y
Jenna	F	27	White	Army	A	2	15, 12	Y	Y
Kevin	M	29	White	Army	A	1	11	Y	Y
Kelly	F	32	White	Air Force	A	2	5, 9	N	Y
Larry	M	25	White	Army	A	2	12, 9	N	Y
Mike	M	28	White	Marines	A	1	5	Y	Y
Sara	F	32	White	Army	NG	1	12	N	Y
Tina	F	25	White	Army	NG	1	7	N	N

Note. A = active; Dep = deployment; N = no; NG = National Guard; R = reservist; VRC = endorses use of the university Veteran Resource Center; VSA = affiliation with the university Veteran Student Association; Y = yes.

Data Collection

Semistructured interviews were conducted by the first author (Gregg), who used an interview guide to collect participants' responses regarding their experience transitioning from the military to postsecondary education. At the completion of each interview, participants completed a demographic form. Initial and follow-up interviews were conducted in a secluded room in the local campus main library and lasted ≤ 52 min. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviewer recorded observations of and reflections on the encounter as field notes, which were used to identify meaningful concepts further explored in follow-up interviews with each participant. Sampling and data collection ceased on reaching data saturation, the point at which the researcher no longer hears novel information (Patton, 2002).

Data Analysis

The researchers modified Braun and Clarke's (2006) phenomenological thematic analysis procedures to identify an overarching "essence" that embodied the emergent themes. They followed these steps: They (1) read the interview transcripts multiple times, (2) identified significant statements, (3) developed initial codes, (4) reviewed initial codes in relation to emerging themes, (5) named and described themes, and (6) developed an essential meaning. Subthemes were incorporated because the authors found them useful for "giving structure to a particularly large or complex theme" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 92).

In short, as the themes and subthemes emerged, the researchers reviewed the textural descriptions to identify an overarching composite meaning for the transition experience. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), "All aspects of the theme should cohere around a central idea or concept" (p. 94). These procedures were essential to accurately analyze the phenomenological data and provide a structural flow to and interconnectedness of the data. The primary researcher (Gregg) was guided by a qualitative researcher (Howell), an expert in peer debriefings to check the interview protocol, interview technique, coding, and interpretive analysis of themes. Patterns across transcripts were used to identify common and reoccurring themes, which were collectively organized using word processing and the qualitative software NVivo (Version 10; QSR International, Doncaster, Victoria, Australia).

Rigor

To enhance trustworthiness, the researchers used strategies described by Lincoln and Guba (1989) throughout data

collection and analysis. An expert qualitative researcher guided the primary researcher in peer debriefings. Bracketing in the form of reflexive journaling was used before each interview session and throughout the analytical process. Bracketing was used to suspend the researcher's beliefs about a participant's lived experience or "to put [those beliefs] in abeyance while attending, instead, to what is given in awareness" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 41). This action kept the researcher as open as possible to meaningful information shared by participants. The primary researcher was on active-duty military service and a postsecondary education student. Member checking was used to confirm his interpretations. An audit trail was maintained via the researcher's memos to make associations between codes and themes.

Results

Data analysis resulted in three themes, each of which had two subthemes. An essential meaning of "emerging in college culture" described the totality of student veterans' transition experiences, representing a transactive process of sorting military experiences, skills, and relationships that was needed to develop a purposeful and meaningful new identity in the context of postsecondary education. Veterans perceived themselves as nontraditional students with unique differences and challenges compared with their peers and expressed difficulty with relating to others as they navigated the postsecondary education context. Student veterans frequently sought out other veterans for social support and engagement in meaningful activities that supported their educational progress.

Theme 1: Repurposing Military Experiences for Life as a Student Veteran

The participants began their transition by repurposing individual traits and skills cultivated in the military to support their new role as a student. For many, this process required reflection on both positive and negative military experiences that guided the transition. Military principles grounded in accountability and discipline resonated with participants as they incorporated the traits learned in the military into the educational context. Brad stated,

If I had one thing it would be discipline. Because I was already used to showing up at 0800 [in the morning]. And I show up every day in class. I'm always on time to class. . . . Before the Marine Corps, I would not have had that.

Participants noted that discipline learned in the military was essential in establishing new routines and complex

occupational patterns by maintaining a structured daily schedule. Jenna said,

And I think that is a remnant from the military. I am very disciplined with my time. Even . . . study hours are incorporated in there. . . . I think those are the two best parts left over from the military that have helped me the most.

Moving On From Military Frustrations. Participants described stressors and frustrations inherent to military culture, which emphasizes a collective, hierarchical social structure in which participants are asked to put the needs of subordinates above their own. Jenna highlighted her sustained stress resulting from being accountable for others in the military:

Especially in a leadership position, I had to constantly ask myself, what might come up that might prevent my plans for this weekend. I can't even tell you how many times I had to leave parties or leave hospitals visiting people where one of my soldiers got drunk and did something stupid. So, not to have like all these guys depending on me, weighing on my mind. . . . I knew there would always be something to worry about [in school], but it is not as grave as something happening to one of your guys.

Larry echoed the stressors involved in being in the military as he described the freedom he felt after leaving:

I enjoy having freedom, having the ability to make my own decisions, craft my own schedule. . . . I could plan something 6 months ahead of time that I could actually stick to come hell or high water. . . . You know, the stuff that I despised while I was in the military.

Finding Veterans Who Could Understand. Student veterans described the importance of finding other veterans who could empathize with their transition to the educational environment. Building friendships with other veterans served as a strategy for developing the social support needed to participate in meaningful educational activities. Student veterans used the support system to cope with stressors related to previous combat experiences and to novel situations experienced in the postsecondary education environment. Brad described his experiences of finding veterans:

As soon as I got out, I joined a Marine Corps league. And I ran into Marines so, ah, the veteran thing helped me a lot cause they had already been there a year or two and already figured out how to handle it. So, we would talk about it. We would drink. . . . I just learned to not voice certain things. . . . They [other students] don't really understand the inner fighting. They don't know.

So, you kind of have to bottle it up. . . . You have to find people that have kind of [gone] through that same kind of thing. Especially on a deployment.

Participants realized the strength of military bonding and commitment for a collective purpose that appeared absent from the postsecondary education context. Bonding and belonging occurred among other student veterans with experiences of shared meaning. Mike described it this way: "It is hard once you get out to find someone that you can trust just like when you were with your military brothers."

Theme 2: Reconstructing Civilian Identity

The military provided opportunities for personal growth in self-concept and self-esteem through professional accomplishments shared by military comrades. However, accomplishments achieved in the military were of limited value in a new context. Kelly explained,

I felt like I had built so many accomplishments for myself in the service, and I felt like I was somebody and then whenever you start over and everything is brand new, I just kind of felt like I was lonely.

Participants sought to reconstruct their military identity into a new civilian identity. Many described this reconstruction process in terms synonymous to "doing and being," which referred to loss of a military role (doing) and figuring out who to be in civilian life. Jessica shared an example of what military work meant to her identity:

I took a lot of pride in what I did and . . . I was a crew chief, mechanic on Black Hawks and on hydraulics, aircraft hydraulics. And it was not a very, um, female-oriented field and, you know, I took a lot of pride in being able, being (1) accepted by my male counterparts, which can be a challenge and (2) being not only good at what I did, but great at what I did . . . and [losing] that identity was really difficult. No longer being able to say that . . . that's who I was, was probably the hardest part.

Another participant, Jenna, also described reconstructing identity in terms of doing and being. Her example highlighted aspects of role reversal in reconstructing her student identity:

I used to be a platoon sergeant and it was like going from being the teacher, I was the role model, I was teaching the classes when we had downtime. Then, [transitioning] from that to being in the background, not being up in front. And really seeing things from the perspective of my soldiers, you know. Trading roles entirely, going from teacher to student. . . . That was what was hard about it; it was foreign.

Feeling Out of Place. Being an older, nontraditional student with different life experiences than the typical traditional-age student created challenges. Tina stated,

It was challenging at first because I felt very out of place. It was hard to feel that I was a part of the school . . . the whole culture of going back to college. Just because you know you are different because you are 10 years older than everybody else.

Another participant described how lonely she felt and the proactive measures she performed to feel more connected with the university culture:

I felt secluded, so I forced myself to be a part of the university. I forced myself to go to the veterans' resource center and ask them, can you please give me a list of organizations to be a part of. . . . I was bouncing around, and it was kind of scary to show up to different organizations until I found something for me.

Jenna summarized her experience with adopting new occupational patterns in daily routines:

I think that in the military, you underestimate, or maybe take for granted, that you wake up every day knowing exactly what you are going to wear, like how you have to have your hair, and you know these steps. And it really is routine; not to have that was the weirdest thing to me, at first.

Projecting Self as a Professional. The participants compared and contrasted themselves with traditional students to ensure they projected their personal values of motivation, work ethic, and effective communication. For these reasons, they explicitly chose to present a professional demeanor. Larry referred to his transition experience as an extension of work:

I consider it my job now, because I am fortunate to get paid for it by the GI Bill, um, because of that, I approach it like I would any other job. Show up on time, do my work, uh, I approach it in the professional sense . . . achieving the best.

Sara described the importance of taking a professional approach in establishing a reputation with professors:

I have made an effort to speak to every one of my professors at the beginning of the semester and say, this is my situation, you know, I'm 32 years old, I have a 4-year-old at home, I own my home, I have animals I have to care for, you know. My husband, even before, he was a police officer, he worked third shift, so he wasn't always available, and on the rare occasion . . . where it didn't matter how much I tried, there was no way for me to meet the requirement, I had the reputation with my professors that we were able to overcome that.

Theme 3: Navigating Postsecondary Context and Interactions

Social participation was a particularly difficult occupation for the student veterans in this study. The challenges of adapting to new social norms and task demands and relating to others occurred in social interactions with traditional students and university professors.

Adapting to a New Context. Participants recognized the need to adapt to novel social interactions, though adapting was viewed as a dynamic process that took time to achieve. Kelly gave this example:

I remember one of the first classes that I sat down in . . . you know in the first class when there are all those freshmen. . . . And the girl sitting next to me is like, "Hi, what dorm are you in?" Um, I am not in a dorm. "You live off campus; that is so awesome!" You know, I don't know how to respond. I don't know what to say. I don't know how to talk about anything. I didn't know. . . . How do you talk about anything in your life? I had no clue what to say to any students in the beginning.

Sara described her level of discomfort with social interactions:

I didn't feel comfortable at all having a conversation. Even people outside of school. Like when they say, "Hey what are you doing?" Well, I am going back to school. But I don't want to say that, because I am uncomfortable. I do not know why I say, "I am going back to school, I am a nontraditional student, prior military, and I am using my GI Bill." I always felt like I *had* to say that.

Difficulty Relating to Traditional Students. The biggest challenge described by all participants was the difficulty in relating to the traditional, younger student. Being a nontraditional student heightened their awareness of differences in their social environment that influenced their perceptions of student norms. Veterans expressed difficulty in relating because their life experiences differed from those of traditional students. James's comparisons involved factors outside of school:

I was married, had a 2-year-old, and was 22. Where most college kids are between 18 and 22. So, they were talking about prom, where they went to high school, and what club they went to last night. You know, I am focused on school and going home to my wife and kids. . . . I was more focused on my teachers, whereas they are focused on the moment.

Mike added the unique life-story differences veterans have:

You know, veterans that have been deployed have dealt with so much that people just don't understand. They just don't understand because they have not seen what you have seen or done what you have done. It's all a joke because they are looking at Call of Duty video-games thinking that is combat. When really it's not . . . there is so much that you can learn about a veteran if you just sit down and talk with them for a couple of hours.

Jenna expressed her concern about being perceived as a mother figure by students:

I don't feel like I relate in any way other than commiserating over the usual homework assignment; that's really our only common ground. It's not that I haven't tried to associate more with college students. It's just I really don't know how. 'Cause I don't really want to come across like a mother figure.

Discussion

A *transition* is “a passage, evolution, development, or abrupt change that leads to movement from one life state, stage, or place to another” (Orentlicher & Gibson, 2015, p. 22). In this study, student veterans described their passage to postsecondary education as a transactive process of standing in both worlds (military and civilian) that required adapting the performance skills and client factors honed in the military to the educational context. Veterans retained military values and beliefs in accountability and discipline as a core ethos to guide time management and structure new daily routines. Moreover, veterans described a dynamic process of reconstructing their social identity from the military context, situated in interdependence and belonging, to the postsecondary education context (Koenig, Maguen, Monroy, Mayott, & Seal, 2014).

Reconstructing their identity as a student veteran was a salient theme as veterans negotiated changes in context and relationships. This theme is common to veteran transition studies (DiRamio et al., 2008; Jones, 2013; Koenig et al., 2014) and a position Christiansen (1999) generalized as “all people (with disabilities or without) are universally concerned about their social identity and acceptance by others” (p. 548). Veterans primarily projected a professional self that would be well received by their peers and instructors. This perspective highlights how veterans worked to maintain a favorable view of self (Swann, 1987) but evoked questions regarding avoidance of social interactions that could in any way dispute this view of the personal self. Christiansen posited that “adults orient their identity toward goals; often related to be-

coming a certain kind of person and not becoming another kind of person” (p. 549). Interestingly, veterans in this study did not overtly express that transitioning to postsecondary education was a primary goal established before leaving the military; rather, it was a product of using entitlements made available by service to their country. Engaging veterans in goal setting early on in the transition may enhance aspects of identity reconstruction.

Contrary to our expectations, participants reported the transition process as an overall positive experience that became more manageable with participation in social networks and group activities involving fellow student veterans. This finding was encouraging because the literature has suggested that veterans often socially isolate themselves from peers (Caffrey, 2009; Tomar & Stoffel, 2014). Access to a robust VRC and participation with the active veteran community offered an inclusive environment for veterans, one filled with appropriate supports and opportunities for relationship building. This finding was significant because inclusive environments result in positive social participation and interactions in meaningful occupations (Landmark, Ju, & Zhang, 2010; Spence-Cochran, Pearl, & Walker, 2013). As veterans found others to empathize with their current life circumstances, they reported being more connected with the university.

Veterans expressed a desire to build on military experiences but did not talk about those military experiences with their peers. This incongruence between belief and behavior highlights a common problem student veterans have in relating to traditional-age students (Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008; Koenig et al., 2014; Tomar & Stoffel, 2014), a problem generally observed with interaction and participation as people engage in social interactions with others known and unknown to them (Søndergaard & Fisher, 2012). Veterans felt they did not have the social skills needed to relate to their peers, which is important because social skills influence successful engagement and participation in occupations (Doble, Bonnell, & Magill-Evans, 1991; Kopelowicz, Liberman, & Zarate, 2006). They attributed this inability to relate to differences in age and life experience. Researchers have theorized that differences between the lexicons of the military and traditional students perpetuate this difficulty in relating (Koenig et al., 2014). In sum, these findings indicate a need to support student veterans holistically and be responsive to the specific challenges that may hinder their academic success (Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008).

Limitations of this study must be acknowledged. The study participants were recruited from a university with a vast amount of veteran resources, so the experiences of this sample may differ from those of veterans attending institutions with more limited veteran supports. In addition, the majority of the student veterans interviewed in this study were White, but veterans of other racial or ethnic groups may have different transition experiences. Further research is warranted to look at the differences in veteran transition experiences among gender, culture, disability status, and educational status.

Implications for Occupational Therapy Practice

Orentlicher and Gibson (2015) suggested that occupational therapy practitioners focus on understanding the client's long-term goals, unique qualities and challenges when making treatment decisions, and anticipating transitions throughout a client's life (p. 27). The findings of this study suggest the following implications for transitioning veterans:

- In response to previous research suggesting the use of a transition coach to facilitate a holistic process addressing the transition needs of student veterans (DiRamio et al., 2008), practitioners should consider their ability to assess occupational performance problem areas of student veterans with the Canadian Occupational Performance Measure (COPM; Law et al., 2005). Goal setting may be initially addressed using the COPM as a holistic, client-centered assessment of veterans' occupational performance.
- Educators should liaise with local university counseling centers and veteran resource programs to assess the availability of veteran orientations, outreach programs, and remedial education courses. Veteran-specific programs facilitate a culture of trust and connectedness across the campus community and promote well-being and success for veterans. Incorporating Matuska's (2012) Life Balance model in campus veteran centers for transition assistance would be ideal because it focuses on four domains (health, relationships, identity, and challenge) commonly identified as problem areas for transitioning veterans. The Life Balance Inventory would provide a reliable and valid outcome measurement tool for such an occupation-based program (Matuska, 2012).
- The prominent challenges veterans experience in social interactions highlight a performance skill practitioners can support for engagement in educational occupations (Simmons, Griswold, & Berg, 2010; Søndergaard &

Fisher, 2012). Evaluation of social interaction outcomes (Fisher & Griswold, 2010) would provide an occupation-based outcome measurement for veterans in a natural context instead of a clinical setting.

Conclusion

As student veterans return from combat environments, the occupational therapy profession must be ready to guide them through occupational engagement in the post-secondary education context. This study provides insights into the lived experience of student veteran transitions and how practitioners and educators can address veterans' needs in occupations in which meaning is shared. ▲

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