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Wendy K. Killam

Suzanne Degges-White

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Understanding the Education-Related Needs of Contemporary Male Veterans

Wendy K. Killam and Suzanne Degges-White

Fifteen male veteran college students participated in a qualitative study examining the challenges they experienced while adjusting to college and the supports that facilitated their transitions. Responses revealed 5 common themes: academic challenges; reluctance to seek assistance; difficulty connecting with faculty, staff, and other students; difficulty finding balance in life; and the value of veterans centers on campus.

Keywords: college student veterans, military service, campus-based veterans centers, adjustment to civilian life, academic stress

Over the past decade, veterans have been enrolling in college in numbers larger than ever before, with the enrollment of veterans having doubled at some universities (McBain, Kim, Cook, & Snead, 2012). According to Bryan and Bryan (2015), it is estimated that over two million U.S. veterans will use the military-related education benefits, which have become more generous over time. In 2008, the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act, combined with an amendment to the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990, had already motivated more veterans to pursue a college education; as more veterans attend college, it is also likely that a larger number will seek campus-based mental health counseling services (Johnson, Graceffo, Hayes, & Locke, 2014).

College counseling centers often struggle to meet the needs of their traditional students who are dealing with predictable adjustment issues, and current data suggest that the number of students dealing with severe psychological problems on college campuses is rising (Gallagher, 2015). College counseling centers must stretch to meet the needs of students managing personality disorders and major

Wendy K. Killam, Department of Counseling, Stephen F. Austin State University; Suzanne Degges-White, Department of Counseling, Adult and Higher Education, Northern Illinois University. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Wendy K. Killam, Department of Counseling, Stephen F. Austin State University, 2008 Alumni Drive, Rusk 206, Nacogdoches, TX 75962 (email: wkillam@sfasu.edu).

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mental illnesses as resources at college counseling centers are often limited and strained (Meilman, 2016). Therefore, the influx of U.S. veterans to college may decrease the ability of college counseling center personnel to meet the needs of every student seeking assistance (Elliott, Gonzales, & Larsen, 2011). Unfortunately, the stigma related to help-seeking behavior by military personnel and veterans still remains. In the past, this has led to an underutilization of university counseling services by veteran students (Johnson et al., 2014). In a recent study, however, researchers found that 60% of colleges and universities offer U.S. veteran-specific services (Cleveland, Branscum, Bovbjerg, & Thorburn, 2015). Because veterans appear on the college campus at varying levels of psychological health, the need for colleges to provide population-specific services will grow larger over time. Following is a discussion of mental health issues that are often faced by returning veterans on the college campus.

MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

According to Bryan and Bryan (2015), at least 20% of veterans who were in Afghanistan or Iraq suffer from a mental illness, such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or depression. The increasing rates of mental illness due to serving in combat have contributed to a significant increase in veteran suicides in recent years. A 2014 study by Barry, Whiteman, and Wadsworth showed that of 628 college student veterans, 46% reported having felt suicidal during the prior year. Symptoms of depression influence the likelihood of related high-risk behaviors, including the excessive use of alcohol. These high-risk behaviors are likely to negatively affect academic performance and success through such factors as lower grade point averages (GPAs; Barry, Whiteman, Wadsworth, & Hitt, 2012). Depression also negatively influences academic performance, and the lifetime comorbidity rate between PTSD and depression is projected to be as high as 95% (Bleich, Koslowsky, Dolev, & Lerer, 1997).

Although PTSD is a major challenge faced by many student veterans, traumatic brain injuries (TBIs) are also common in this population (Fortier et al., 2014). Fortier et al. (2014) noted that TBIs are often considered a signature trauma from recent military conflicts. TBIs can create ongoing issues such as headaches, memory problems, and sleep issues (Grandhi, Tavakoli, Ortega, & Simmonds, 2017), which also negatively affect success in college and quality of life. PTSD, TBIs, and other mental health conditions have contributed to the increase of veteran suicides in the last decade (Bryan & Bryan, 2015). The distress caused by these trauma-related illnesses limits the ability of many veterans to succeed in college course work. Returning home, veterans face new challenges as they seek to establish their new, nonmilitary-related identities (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010), one of which is often that of college student. The path to establishing themselves as successful students invites new complications because they may need to learn or relearn the skills that support academic performance.

ACADEMIC CHALLENGES

It is not surprising that veterans are often at high risk for academic failure due to the stresses and mental health challenges they may experience as a result of their military service. In fact, veterans report feelings of disconnection from their institutions, and research indicates that veterans earn lower GPAs than nonveterans (Durdella & Kim, 2012). Similar to other nontraditional student populations, veterans are often older than their peers, feel more mature, and are compelled to balance work and family responsibilities. This can lead to lower levels of active engagement in the college experience than their nonveteran peers (Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014). This feeling of being different from their classmates can result in feelings of disconnection from their peers and other college-related personnel. Research indicates that connections with others are essential to college success, and social connections have been specifically linked to academic success (Allen & Robbins, 2008). Thus, it is imperative that colleges and universities provide safe and welcoming environments designed to meet the needs of veterans.

SUPPORT AND CONNECTIONS

Peer support has been correlated with higher levels of mental health (Olsen et al., 2014), and psychological well-being positively affects academic well-being. Research indicates that a sense of connection and belonging positively affects student retention in higher education, including students in marginalized populations (Boyd, Blue, & Im, 2017; Costen, Waller, & Wozencroft, 2013), and retention is key to degree completion. Recent research has revealed that social support and unit cohesion during deployment are important factors in successful reentry to civilian life and lessened frequency of PTSD diagnoses (Nevarez, Yee, & Waldinger, 2017). In addition, healthy social relationships both pre- and postdeployment also enhance a returning serviceperson's well-being (Elder & Clipp, 1989). On the college campus, veterans' ability to engage with other veterans can help them feel less isolated and more supported (Rumann, Rivera, & Hernandez, 2011), which positively influences academic success.

Complicating the reentry of veterans into civilian life and their entry into college is the strong aversion that many veteran students feel toward seeking assistance. The hesitation to seek assistance may be influenced by veterans' military training. In the military environment, conforming to procedures is required, and service personnel must be able to overcome any fears that they may hold (Alfred, Hammer, & Good, 2014). Unfortunately, academia functions much differently than the military. Therefore, veterans may face unexpected hurdles once they reach campus. As veterans pursue higher education in growing numbers, it is essential for institutions to be able to meet academic and

related needs of this population in order for them to feel a sense of belonging and connection on campus.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Although 60% of colleges have some form of specialized center for students who are veterans—be it a bricks-and-mortar, stand-alone structure or a component of a larger student services entity—it is important to explore the needs of these students to decrease the dropout rate, enhance retention, and promote degree completion. Research indicates that veterans may be wrestling with compromised mental and physical health, academic challenges, and lack of support. Therefore, the two driving research questions this study was designed to answer were as follows:

Research Question 1: What are the common challenges faced by veterans as they transition from military life to campus life?

Research Question 2: What are the resources that veterans feel are needed to facilitate this transition?

METHOD

Interview Protocol

A structured interview protocol was developed to explore the academic, social, personal, and relational experiences of veteran students. The design of the study was qualitative in nature to allow participants the opportunity to fully express their feelings about the transition to college and the college experience. The interpretive qualitative design (Merriam, 1998) provided for rich data that may not have been obtained with a quantitative survey method. The questions used in the interview gave participants optimum freedom to discuss their challenges and experiences, which precluded the need for researchers to form preconceived hypotheses regarding veterans' experiences. The interview questions are found in the Appendix.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face by the first author. Each interview lasted approximately 1 to 1.5 hours, and the researcher used audio recordings and written transcriptions to chronicle each interview. To facilitate the interview process, the researcher relied on client-centered and reflective listening skills to ensure participants felt comfortable to express their feelings and experiences. After transcription, researchers reviewed the transcripts and determined the differences and similarities of affective and cognitive experiences across participants. The researchers used a thematic approach in their analysis of the interviews so that a rich understanding of the lived experiences of the veterans could be described (Creswell, 2013). Five common themes based on the similarities of experiences across the participants emerged. These themes will be discussed in the following sections.

Participants and Research Setting

This study was conducted at a 4-year, land-based institution. Participants were recruited via flyers that were posted on campus in administrative and classroom buildings, including the campus veterans center. All of the participants in the study had served in the Army and completed at least one combat tour of duty during their military service. There were 15 participants, all men, ranging in age from 25 to 46 years, with a mean age of 29 years. Although the study was open to both male and female veterans, only men volunteered to participate. According to statistics provided by the U.S. Census Bureau (Lofquist, 2017), approximately 8% of veterans are women, so the smaller number of potential participants likely contributed to the absence of any female participants. All were using military benefits to further their educational goals. The sample was somewhat ethnically diverse in that four participants identified as African American, two as biracial, one as Hispanic/Caucasian, and eight as Caucasian. Nine of the participants were married, four were divorced, and two were single and had never been married.

RESULTS

We interviewed a total of 15 veterans to learn more about their experiences as veterans pursuing higher education at a land-based, public university. A number of common themes were revealed during the review of the transcripts. These included the following: (a) academic challenges; (b) reluctance to seek assistance; (c) difficulty connecting with faculty, staff, and other students; (d) difficulty finding balance in life; and (e) the value of campus-based veterans centers. These five themes speak to both of our research questions. Although nonveteran students may also experience somewhat similar challenges, veterans are managing a significant shift in their personal identities as they attempt to successfully adjust to a return to civilian life and entry into a new culture. Many of the unique needs and challenges faced by veterans who are returning to college have not been thoroughly addressed, especially in terms of factors that affect success and adjustment (Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, & Wadsworth, 2013).

Academic Environment and Related Challenges

Veterans face a variety of academic-related challenges upon their entry into higher education. These include struggles with course material, unfamiliarity with teaching style, and other more structural concerns. The most striking common area of concern revolves around the adjustment from a regimented life in the service to one that is significantly less constrained.

The military uses a hands-on approach to teaching and learning, which is different from the approach most colleges implement. Military life also provides significant levels of conformity and structure across virtually every aspect of service personnel's functioning. Veterans may be disadvantaged by the relative absence of conformity across academic courses, and this may be

part of the reason that veterans report challenges in adapting to the academic requirements. Even faculty within the same discipline or department may have significantly different expectations, grading practices, and teaching styles (Durdella & Kim, 2012). One participant in our study shared, “In the military, they tell you what to do and when to do it. It’s been hard trying to schedule things and make sure I study enough.” Each of the participants indicated that he felt unprepared for college. As one participant noted, “I sometimes find it hard to concentrate and just do not feel like I am really ready for class.”

Adjusting to the variability of course instruction, assignments, and assessments was not an easy task for these veterans, who were more comfortable with the structure of military training. Veterans are comfortable with the rules and regulations of the military, and our participants expressed frustration with several of the policies that higher education institutions had in place. One cause of concern was the discovery that a veteran’s prior military service did not count for college credit and that, in some cases, faculty seemed to devalue veterans’ experiences. This sentiment is highlighted in the comments of one participant who said,

There are times when my experience is not valued, and I find it frustrating that I cannot get college credit for the hands-on experience. While reading books is fine, it’s not the same as actually doing things. I lived through what is now history in a very direct and real way.

Similarly, another participant shared,

The professor talked about the war efforts in class but did not have real understanding. Unless you were there, you have no clue. The course was a waste of time. I was really upset when some students kept saying that the only reason we were in the Middle East was because of oil.

Another challenge embedded in military policy was the requirement that students must be enrolled in a particular number of hours each semester to qualify for benefits. Some participants felt that taking fewer courses would have helped them avoid feelings of being overwhelmed by their course work; as one veteran revealed, “Taking fewer courses would be helpful so I could focus more. With anxiety issues, it’s hard to focus but I have to take a certain number of courses to get things paid for.” Academic success can be challenging for veterans and civilians alike. However, college life and college expectations are significantly different from military life and expectations, and this left participants feeling ill-prepared. Complicating the situation further, many veterans seem to share a resistance to proactive help seeking.

Reluctance to Seek Assistance

Although depression and PTSD are prevalent in veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan (Owens, Herrera, & Whitesell, 2009), those diagnosed with these disorders may be reluctant to seek help. There remains a strong stigma attached to mental health care, and veterans may be especially unwilling to appear weak. This aversion to help seeking may contribute to veteran students' unwillingness to seek assistance in college. Over half of the participants indicated that they had needed help but did not ask for it from faculty and staff. Even when their need for assistance was related to course work, they chose not to seek help. One participant stated, "I really did not want to bother the instructor since they always seem so busy." Another participant shared,

It seems like I was missing something in what was wanted despite reading the assignment guidelines numerous times. Sometimes I wish things were more clear and black and white. I think it may be common for instructors to want us to try to figure things out.

Participants expressed concerns related to being unable to complete assignments or follow instructions correctly. This was particularly true when it came to assignments for which they felt the instructions were unclear. Participants experienced discomfort at the prospect of asking questions of individuals in authority as well as feeling fearful that their need for assistance would be negatively perceived by others. As one participant shared, "The one time I asked a question, I felt stupid because the answer was in the syllabus. I guess I should have read it better." The need to feel in charge and the intolerance of behaviors that look like weakness—in others and themselves—speak to the tendency to conform to the stereotypes of masculinity. This is a tendency that Alfred et al. (2014) found to be predictive of compromised psychological well-being.

As noted earlier in the literature review, the military does not typically encourage help seeking as a practice (Alfred et al., 2014). However, in a college setting, if a student is unclear about an assignment, reluctance to seek clarification can generate feelings of frustration and confusion as well as compromised academic success. Not only does the reluctance to seek assistance pose a problem academically, it also negatively affects relationships between students and faculty or staff.

Inadequate Connections With Faculty, Staff, and Students

It is important for college students to connect with faculty and staff as campus connections have been linked with healthy adjustment to college and academic success (Olsen et al., 2014), as well as the sense of belonging and academic self-efficacy (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2010). Veterans may find it especially difficult to connect with those who do not understand the military culture, have little knowledge of current overseas conflicts, or ask inappropriate questions (Dunwoody, Plane, Trescher & Rice, 2014). As one participant noted,

“It’s hard to connect with someone who just does not understand. I feel like some of the instructors live in their own reality.” Another noted frustration with faculty who were overly opinionated: “I got really angry when one professor was giving his political opinions and not really considering other viewpoints. It’s like I had to keep my mouth shut if I wanted to pass the course.”

Durdella and Kim (2012) indicated that veterans often struggle with building relationships on campus because faculty and staff have a limited understanding of the unique challenges that veterans face in adapting to civilian life. Participants shared their feelings through comments such as, “They always are having events on campus but I never have time to attend due to needing to pick my son up from school or having to go to a doctor’s appointment.”

Participants reported frustration and feelings of disconnection from others on campus. In a study by Gonzalez and Elliott (2013), results indicated that 72% of faculty members in the study knew very little about military culture. Faculty seldom receive training on the needs of diverse student groups, including veterans. According to Elliott et al. (2011), there is a need for student services personnel and faculty to receive training on ways to work with veterans in order to establish environments that provide these students with a sense of safety. In addition to having difficulty connecting with faculty and staff, veterans may struggle to connect with other students for some of the same reasons.

Frustration With Other Students

Making meaningful connections with other students has been linked to academic success (Boyd et al., 2017; Costen et al., 2013). In addition, strong positive peer support has been connected to lower rates of mental health issues, decreased anxiety, and more academic success. In fact, some studies have found that this is even more critical for veterans (Whiteman et al., 2013). Unfortunately, veterans may already view themselves as outsiders among their peers due to feelings of being misunderstood by traditional college students. According to Borsari et al. (2017), veterans perceive themselves to be at a very different stage of life than traditional college students. The participants in our study reported similar feelings about their relationships with their peers. Several indicated impatience with students who complain about college or their professors. They described a belief that students need to follow the rules and do what is expected, as their own military training would suggest, with one participant saying, “It’s disrespectful to question the instructor and want to get assignments changed. I see that a lot with some of the younger students. It’s like they don’t really want to be here.” Additionally, participants indicated a strong dislike for group work, especially when they had to work with students they perceived as needy and less mature. Another participant explained, “I hate working with people who do not take their education seriously. It’s frustrating working on group projects with people who want to do the bare minimum to get by.” Veteran students expressed frustration when students asked too many questions of the professor and wanted to see changes in the syllabus. For example, one participant said,

Some students just seem to be real babies when they don't get their way. They think the professor should cater to them. They don't get that that's not real life. It's frustrating to watch, and I hate it when the professor gives in to students, probably out of fear of bad student evaluations.

College student roles are vastly different from those of military service personnel. The transition to a new culture can be especially challenging for veterans who genuinely enjoyed military life and culture. Perceptions of the importance of college can also affect the adjustment of the veteran (Ryan, Carlstrom, Hughey, & Harris, 2011). It is important for institutions to recognize the struggle that veterans may face as they work to fit into a new culture and embrace a new role or identity. Changes in one area of life often influence other areas of life, as well; thus, it can be challenging for veterans to find balance among their multiple roles.

Balance

Most nontraditional students struggle with finding balance because they may have families to support and work commitments to honor in addition to attending college. They also may feel less connected to the university and less involved with activities on campus than traditional college students. Veterans may also face additional challenges in finding balance (Olsen et al., 2014). In fact, each of the current study's participants indicated that it was difficult at times to balance going to college while attending to other areas of life. For those who had children or families, they particularly emphasized how difficult they found it at times. As one participant shared, "I feel stressed at times having to support my family, and I fear that if I do not succeed in college I am letting them down."

College classes and assignments took time from the participants that they would rather have spent with their families. Additionally, some participants expressed frustration with having numerous medical appointments that often resulted in class absences. Participants shared a feeling that instructors were not universally accommodating of student needs when classes were missed or students fell behind in class. Another aspect of finding balance for veteran students was related to personal relationships and, in particular, marriage. Married participants indicated that they had experienced marital difficulties upon their return. In fact, four of the participants reported past or current engagement in marital counseling. Participants expressed feelings of stress related to balancing multiple roles, with one stating, "I want my child to see that it is possible to beat the odds and overcome things and earn a degree, but I feel like I spend too much time studying." Another individual shared, "Going to school takes away time I spend with family. I really wish that I could find a better balance."

Being able to manage one's time and commitments is integral to college success. However, this is often a challenge for veterans. Not only are they at higher risk of dropping out of college than other groups, but they also often have lower GPAs (Olsen et al., 2014). The challenge of finding balance can be negatively affected by compromised mental or physical well-being.

Mental Health and Medical Concerns

Many veterans suffer from multiple medical and mental health issues. It is predicted that close to a third of veterans who served in Operation Enduring Freedom or Operation Iraqi Freedom will be diagnosed with at least one of three illnesses: PTSD, major depressive disorder, or TBI (Barry et al., 2012). Veterans who suffer from PTSD have indicated that the symptoms interfere with their ability to adjust to the less structured environment of college. They frequently feel isolated and different from other students. One participant shared just how overwhelming PTSD symptoms can be: "It's hard to forget what I have seen. I still can't get the pink road [road with blood from tanks running over bodies] out of my mind. I try to focus, but sometimes . . ."

Although veterans have a much higher suicide rate than nonveteran students (Holland, Malott, & Currier, 2014), they are frequently reluctant to seek treatment for much-needed mental health care due to the stigma attached to treatment (Fortney et al., 2016). In a study exploring the help-seeking behaviors of veterans on college campuses, Albright, Fletcher, Pelts, and Taliaferro (2017) revealed that primary relationships were significant predictors of veterans' decisions to visit a college counseling center. Married veterans were more likely to seek assistance than those who were not married. This underscores the importance of support systems for veterans adjusting to civilian life. Also, related to help-seeking behaviors, Bonar, Bohnert, Walters, Ganoczy, and Valenstein (2015) found that some veterans will use the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs centers, whereas others prefer not to do so for fear of having it recorded in their military records. Bringing attention to their mental health needs is a choice that many veterans choose not to make.

In addition to mental health issues, medical issues can affect college success. According to Lopez, Springer, and Nelson (2016), veterans who suffer from a TBI may have difficulty following along during classes and meeting course expectations. They may need additional accommodations to be successful in college. However, faculty may not know how to effectively work with these students due to a lack of relevant preparation. Veterans may return home with a myriad of physical injuries, and participants noted how physical disabilities interfered with their academic success, with one explaining, "The prosthetic leg sometimes falls off. I spend way too much time at the doctor's office that it takes away time from other things, including schoolwork." Another described, "Sometimes I don't think my instructors understand that I need to stand up during class due to back pain. They seem to get upset. I tried talking to them about it but one actually rolled her eyes at me."

These participants articulated the multiple ways in which military injuries can have long-term consequences. It is sobering that the majority of veterans who enter college never obtain their degree (Ryan et al., 2011). This finding is concerning and has likely been an impetus for institutions of higher education to take action to reverse this trend. One way in which some colleges have begun to address these needs is through veterans centers, which are able to deliver programming and interventions that address the unique needs of these students.

Veterans Centers

Each of the participants had made use of the veterans center on campus and found that it provided a way to connect with other veterans, learn about college resources, and get a variety of academic needs met. A major strength of such centers is that they provide veterans with the opportunity to engage with other students who fully understand the multiple challenges they face as they transition back into civilian life and into college (Kirchner, 2015). Additionally, their veteran peers understand military culture and can offer relevant guidance and support as they move through the academic process (Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009). For participants in this study, the campus veterans center provided a safe space where they felt understood and supported. Participants felt the center “had their back,” provided a space where they could be “renewed and encouraged,” and was a “safe place to go” to be heard and understood. As one participant noted, “[Veterans centers] provide me with resources that have helped me in this new life chapter.”

The lack of understanding by others concerning veterans’ needs often leaves the veteran feeling isolated and alone on a college campus. However, veterans centers can help veterans connect with other veterans and provide a network of support on the college campus. As one participant shared, “I have been fortunate to make friends with other vets who understand what it is like to go to college for the first time.” Ryan et al. (2011) indicated that an individual’s perceptions and the presence of support influence a person’s ability to effectively transition into college. The need for veterans to feel supported and understood is paramount to their success in college.

DISCUSSION

Five common themes emerged in this study that provide support to and extend the findings of previous studies (i.e., Gonzalez & Elliott, 2013; Rumann et al., 2011). These themes draw attention to several implications related to services that may be of value to this student population. First, the participants often did not feel a sense of connection to faculty, staff, or traditional college students. In fact, they often are frustrated with individuals from these groups whom they feel do not understand their perspectives, experiences, or identities as veterans. Secondly, participants related that they would get upset when directions were

not clear, and they had a hard time asking for help. Without appropriate assistance, these tendencies may negatively affect a student's ability to succeed in college. Third, veterans often struggle with symptoms of PTSD, TBI, and other mental and medical issues. These struggles can hinder their ability to succeed, and unfortunately, colleges are often ill prepared to help students who face these issues. Fourth, because veterans are often reluctant to ask for help, perceiving help seeking as a sign of weakness, institutions must find a way to deliver services in a setting and format that veterans feel comfortable accessing.

Taking these four implications into consideration as a group, it is clear that veterans are a unique population who warrant consideration and specialized services tailored to meet their needs. It is of significance that the participants in this study did not give evidence that there was any stigma associated with going to the campus veterans center. Thus, the potential influence that this center may hold is important to consider. This was the one place on campus where participants felt a sense of belonging and connection, key elements of student success. It is also a place where veterans felt comfortable seeking assistance, socializing, and building relationships with others.

It is important for college personnel to be perceived as approachable by veteran students. Students need to understand that seeking assistance either for academic or mental health issues is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of strength. Alfred et al. (2014) suggested that social media could be one way in which colleges try to connect with veterans and encourage them to seek assistance if needed. If students are willing to seek assistance, this could facilitate connections with faculty and staff. Although many universities do not have veterans centers on campus, those that do are taking steps to help retain and support veterans. It is important for colleges to consider what resources can be provided that will help students reach graduation.

Implications for Counselors

Although college counseling resources (e.g., personnel, space, availability) may be limited, skillful coordination of services may broaden and deepen counselors' reach into this population. For instance, if a college has a veterans center on campus, college counselors could offer group support sessions on a weekly basis at the center where students may feel more comfortable attending meetings. Additionally, veteran students who attend group sessions could be encouraged to seek additional treatment if needed from the nearest Veterans Affairs or college counseling center. Veterans centers might also offer opportunities for families of veterans to engage with each other. Helping build support networks for students' families will strengthen the support that the students have from their partners and children. Counselors could provide programming addressing effective transitioning to college as well as programming aimed at helping families be supportive of their veteran students as they move through college. It is also important to refer qualifying veterans to any disability resources on

campus. And, in tandem, disability resource personnel should receive training related to working with these individuals.

In addition to facilitating family support, counseling center staff might offer campus personnel programming on the needs of students who are veterans. Training sessions on ways to assist veteran students and ways to be sensitive to their needs may enhance retention of these students. Many civilians lack knowledge of military culture, but by gaining knowledge about this unique group, faculty and staff would be in a much more favorable position to be able to understand and respond to the difficulties and challenges that veteran students face as they transition to college.

Limitations and Future Research

As do all studies, this study has some limitations. The study used a small and nonrandom selection, thus the results cannot be generalized to all veterans who are college students. Although the sample was somewhat diverse in ethnicity, all of the participants were men who attended the same university in the southern United States. The findings may have differed if the study had been conducted at a different institution or if the chosen institution did not house a veterans support center.

It is important to consider what will help student veterans be successful. Thus, this study could be replicated at a campus without a veterans center to see if themes and experiences of support are different. Also, it would be helpful to conduct a study that included more diverse participants as well as studies in geographically diverse areas. The impact and programming of campus centers for veteran students could be studied in further detail using a quantitative approach for the methodology. Determining the best use of campus resources to assist students should be a priority for institutions of higher learning as public education faces unparalleled financial straits and a climbing number of returning veterans seeking higher education.

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APPENDIX

Interview Questions

1. What factors influenced your decision to return to college or attend college?
2. What type of support have you received in attending college?
3. What has your relationship with other college students been like so far?
4. In what ways are your needs as a college student different from those of a traditional college-age student?
5. What has been the most helpful thing the university has done to assist you in adjusting to your role as a college student?
6. What has been the biggest challenge you have faced in attending college?
7. Is there anything you wish faculty and staff knew about the needs you have in attending college?
8. What aspect of college has been the most difficult for you?
9. What things did you not anticipate in returning to college?
10. Is there anything else you want to tell me about your experience as a college student?