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Recommended Citation

Hoggan, Chad and Pelligrino, Lauren (2014). "Female Veterans Transitioning to Community College: A Case Study," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2014/roundtables/14>

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Female Veterans Transitioning to Community College: A Case Study

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Keywords: student veterans, female veterans, community college, transition model,

Abstract: Student veterans cope with a myriad of issue as they transition back into civilian life. Using Schlossberg's "4S" transition model, this roundtable presents findings from a qualitative study involving recent military veterans transitioning into community college.

Much has been published about military veterans returning to college from active duty but surprisingly, very little empirical research exists about the experience of veterans in college and specifically, their experiences in community college. While community college students exhibit high instances of risk factors, student veterans may be coping with a series of issues that compound the risk factors including adjusting from the hierarchal structure of the military to the self-directed, autonomous environment of college, navigating the bureaucracy of the VA and the GI Bill, and in some cases, dealing with physical or mental disabilities as a direct result of their service (Wurster, Rinaldi, Woods, & Ming Lui, 2013; Wheeler, 2012; Rumann, 2011; Ackerman & DiRamio, 2009).

Wheeler (2012) found that student veterans experienced emotional highs and lows concerning personal relationships, feelings of separation because they were older than the other students, and stress in dealing with the campus veterans office and obtaining their GI Bill benefits through the VA. The case presented in this paper supplements the findings in Wheeler's study and contributes to a more in-depth understanding of the experience of student veterans.

Schlossberg's (1966, 2011) 4S transition model assumes that individuals become reflective when unexpected, significant life events occur or when expected events do not occur. In their reflection on the nature of the phenomena, individuals assess the *situation, self, supports, and strategies* associated with the event or non-event (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988). Through a qualitative case study methodology and a series of interviews during the first year of community college, this roundtable presents the experiences of two female student veterans through the lens of the 4S model. As is the goal with qualitative inquiry and case study in particular, this investigation sought to develop a holistic description and explanation of the transition for women from the military into college.

Results

The *situation* can encompass a series of factors including a trigger event, timing of the transition, and feelings of control (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). For Amy and Jessica, the situation, or in this case, the trigger event, was the desire for a "piece of paper" or the physical representation of completing an educational endeavor. They believed the "piece of paper" was the most pressing mission at this point their lives. Feeling hurried to complete her degree quickly, Amy enrolled in 6 classes (18 hours) during her first semester, arguably an excessive number for a new college student.

The concept of *self*, or the personal traits and internalization of feelings of self-efficacy, motivation, and strengths and weaknesses, was similar for both women (Schlossberg, 1988;

Ryan et al., 2011; Wheeler, 2012). Jessica and Amy experienced feelings of self-consciousness relating to their status as non-traditional students. They both felt very strongly about setting a good example for their children, a factor they believed motivated them to work hard. Jessica, in particular, felt more confident in her intellect than she had before she started college.

Amy and Jessica experienced different levels of *support*, the impacts of which manifested in their outlook for the future. Both women felt their husbands were supportive of their academic pursuits but childcare was a major concern. Whereas Jessica had a strong support system in friends and family, Amy did not and she feared the issue jeopardized her future as a college student. Despite Jessica's stronger support network, she did not believe that full-time employment would ever be an option because of the high costs associated with childcare. Moreover, Jessica developed a strong bond with an instructor who ultimately encouraged her to change her major to communications, one for which she felt much better suited.

Strategies refers to the coping mechanisms individuals use to interpret or evaluate change and reduce anxiety during transition (Schlossberg, 2011). For Amy and Jessica, creatively using their time and relying on their military training in time management and organization proved invaluable in their efforts to balance school and home life. Still, both women experienced struggles in at least one class, though both believed these were anomalous situations and not indicative of their abilities as students. It noteworthy, however, that Jessica struggled in a course associated with her previous major, and Amy struggled in a challenging course during her 6-course semester. In both cases, these women were experiencing difficulty due to inadequate course planning and uninformed decision-making.

Discussion

These findings reveal some relatively unique set of needs that female veterans may exhibit. For both of them, their children were their primary motivation for obtaining a degree, and childcare was their primary challenge. With limited time to dedicate to school, combined with an urgent desire to finish school as quickly as possible, they both made decisions about coursework that, ultimately, were detrimental to their performance in class and necessitated changes after their first semester. Their experiences demonstrate a need for greater academic and career counseling.

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