Examining the Relationships between Student Veterans and Faculty Members

Sierra C. Sullivan
Texas State University - San Marcos, scs180@txstate.edu

Peggy Ann Everett
Texas State University - San Marcos, pae28@txstate.edu

Recommended Citation

Student Veteran and Faculty Relationships

Sierra Sullivan & Peggy A. Everett
Texas State University

Abstract: Higher education institutions are failing to raise awareness to veterans' issues among faculty and staff to ensure an inclusive and supportive environment (Sander, 2012). In order to address this concern, this pilot study was conducted to further explore the topic of SSM/V returning for their degrees, and the barriers they face.

Key Words: Student veterans, faculty relationships, GI Bill

Introduction

Higher education institutions are failing to raise awareness to veterans' issues among faculty and staff to ensure an inclusive and supportive environment (Sander, 2012). With less than half of institutions offering any type of training for faculty and staff on veteran and military students, many faculty and staff members within higher education are lacking the tools to support returning student service-members and veterans (SSM/V) on their journeys towards degrees (Sander, 2012). This pilot study was conducted to further explore the topic of SSM/V returning for their degrees and the barriers they face. The researchers conducted a qualitative study using narrative analysis. Interviews were conducted with three faculty members and three SSM/V at a large, public institution of higher education in Central Texas. The researchers analyze their findings using Taylor-Powell and Renner's (2003) methods for narrative data analysis and interpretation. Findings explore both SSM/V and faculty members' experiences inside and outside the classroom, specifically focusing on their perceptions of one another.

Situated in adult education, many student veterans face barriers in pursuing their academic journeys (Norman, Rosen, Himmerich, Myers, Davis, Browne, & Piland, 2015) with around 75% of SSM/V being over the age of 24, over 50% having children, and most have adult responsibilities (Pattillo, 2011). With close to 30 billion dollars spent on the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill (Wagner, Cave, & Winston, 2013), 4% of student veterans make up the total undergraduate population (Molina, 2015). Of that figure, 68% of schools fail

to track retention and persistence of the SSM/V population (Fain, 2012). Research centered on the SSM/V experiences at the university level is important to adult education as it can shed light on faculty and SSM/V interactions, persistence, and retention. This pilot study hopes to add to the literature in this area. In addition, some of the data obtained can used for faculty sensitivity training to SSM/Vs' needs as well as give a voice to both students and faculty who have experiences that may have gone unheard.

Current Literature

Faculty Perceptions of Student Veterans

With the influx of SSM/V returning for post-secondary degrees, higher education professionals must be properly prepared to work with this nontraditional community (Vacchi, 2012). This preparation starts through exploring the perceptions that faculty and staff hold toward returning SSM/V. Educating staff and faculty on how to best support the SSM/V community on college campuses follows suit. Research on educators' perceptions of certain communities often revolves around the K-12 pipeline (Brak, Bagby, Janes & Sulak, 2010). This leaves a large gap in the literature in terms of higher education professionals' perception towards specific communities of college students. Brak et al., (2010) examines faculty's willingness to work with SSM/V, finding that over a quarter of the participants held negative feelings towards SSM/V students. This data concluded that the educators were less willing to teach and work with this student community, linking this unwillingness to support the SSM/V students with negative feelings towards past war and political views (Brak et al., 2010). This negative perception with SSM/V is further reflected in Doe's (2016) findings, "that faculty members were unfamiliar with the actual challenges faced by student veterans and were guided by stereotypes of veterans as wounded shells of people who were struggling to pick up pieces of their lives" (para. 2). In addition, Brak et al. (2010) suggest "the more negative feelings that a faculty member reported about serving in the military, then the less likely it was that the faculty member would report being able to put those feelings and perception aside…" (p. 34). This highlights the importance of being able to moderate those perceptions through sensitivity training, so both faculty/staff and SSM/V experience successful outcomes in degree persistence.

In terms of faculty perception on SSM/V academic readiness, Vacchi (2015) finds that "staff and faculty tend to assume that veterans, who may have been out of school

for an extended period of time, will be academically weak" (para. 7). While there is a time lapse between formal education, many veterans have taken courses in military science, foreign language courses, special forces classes; contrary to faculty perception, they are not standing stagnate for years at a time (Wheeler, 2014). While academic readiness is a factor for college success, the immediate perception that a specific community of students (SSM/V) are incapable of succeeding inside the classroom due to a break in formal education can only hinder successful classroom outcomes. This highlights the need for higher education institutions to review their pedagogical approaches when working with SSM/V.

Student Veteran Perception

With negative faculty perceptions present inside the classroom, the perception that SSM/V communities hold towards faculty also impacts classroom dynamic. Faculty are seen as "liberal elites who needed to be carefully screened by vets so as to avoid classes, which were likely to undermine student veteran experience [further suggesting] many faculty are inclined to 'bait' student veterans into defending their military services or conservative views," (Doe, 2016, para. 4). With many SSM/V students expressing their hesitation to disclose their military status to staff and faculty for fear of judgment, higher education institutions must better understand how this fear influences SSM/V students higher education outcomes and best practices to mitigate negative perceptions from higher education faculty and staff (Rumann & Hamarick, 2010; Newbury, 2016).

References

Bagby, J. H., Barnard-Brak, L., Thompson, L. W., & Sulak, T. N. (2015). Is anyone listening? An ecological systems perspective on veterans transitioning from the military to academia. *Military Behavioral Health, 3*(4), 219-229. doi:10.1080/21635781.2015.1057306

Doe, S., (2016). The uneasy civilian: On campus with faculty and student vets. *AmericanServes*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University.

Fain, P. (2012). *Scrambling to understand veterans*. Retrieved from https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/12/04/colleges-fail-track-performance-student-veterans-survey-finds

Newbury, G. (2016). *Student veteran perceptions of campus services and military friendly status: An exploratory study* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). San Marcos, CA.: California State University.

Norman, S., Rosen, J., Himmerich, S., Myers, U., Davis, B., Browne, K., & Piland, N. (2015). Student veteran perceptions of facilitators and barriers to achieving academic goals. *Journal of Rehabilitation Research and Development, 52*(6), 701-712.

Molina, D. (2015). By the numbers: Undergraduate student veterans. Retrieved from http://www.acenet.edu/the-presidency/columns-and-features/Pages/By-the-Numbers-Undergraduate-Student-Veterans.aspx

Pattillo, S. P. (2011). *Are student veterans a traditional, nontraditional, or special population? A study of veterans on the Auburn University campus* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Auburn, AL.: Auburn University.

Rumann, C. B., & Hamrick, F. A. (2010). Student veterans in transition: Re-enrolling after war zone deployments. *Journal of Higher Education, 81*(4), 431–458.

Sander, L. (2012). "Veterans' lounge? Check. Faculty awareness? Working on it." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Taylor-Powell, E. and Renner, M. (2003) *Analyzing Qualitative Data*. Retrieved from https://learningstore.uwex.edu/assets/pdfs/g3658-12.pdf

Vacchi, D. (2012). Considering student veterans on the twenty-first-century college campus. *About Campus, 17*(2), 15-21. doi:10.1002/abc/21075.

Vacchi, D. (2015). *Four misconceptions veterans face in higher education.* Retrieved from https://evolllution.com/opinions/misconceptions-veterans-face-higher-education/

Wagner, M., Cave, A., & Winston, H. (2014). *GI bill covered tuition for nearly a million post-9/11 veterans without tracking their progress.* Retrieved from https://www.publicintegrity.org/2013/09/03/13297/gi-bill-covered-tuition-nearly-million-post-911-veterans-without-tracking-their

Wheeler, E., (2014). *Introduction to the student veteran/active duty/guard/reserve serving student at-a-glance.* Retrieved from https://www.cgc.maricopa.edu/Students/Veterans/Documents/Toolkit/4v3_00_INTRO_Student_vets_At-A-Glance.pdf