



ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

Military Veterans at Universities

A Case of Culture Clash

IRENE GLASSER
ROGER WILLIAMS U

JOHN T POWERS
RHODE ISLAND C

WILLIAM H ZYWIAK
BROWN U

The new GI Bill will allow more veterans to pursue college. This increase in resources is long overdue. However, our recent research indicates that by returning to college veterans may face a social and academic environment that does not always honor their work as soldiers or their efforts to get in and stay in college. We conducted two focus groups in May and October 2009 to uncover barriers and challenges that veterans may experience when attending college, as part of the study "Helping Colleges to Help Vets," directed by research psychologist William H Zywiak. Participants were recruited by John T Powers and the focus groups were lead by Irene Glasser. The Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation (PIRE) funded the research and approved it through their IRB. Participants represented a variety of branches of the US Armed Forces and all had been in combat (Iraq, Afghanistan, Grenada, Vietnam). Six were currently attending public institutions of higher education in Rhode Island and one had dropped out before completing his degree many years before. Although most themes that emerged in the discussion were related to college students that have served in the military, some are also relevant to other non-traditional college students.

Participants reported great variation in the quality of the VA certified officials on campus who were responsible for helping them through the college process. The veterans told us that they had difficulty in obtaining all of the benefits the original GI Bill was designed to provide and that this was a source of stress and demoralization. They were frustrated by the lack of knowledge and expertise within their colleges regarding VA benefits, which they experienced as a lack of support. The veterans found that their GI Bill benefits were often received after tuition was due, and they felt stressed by the pressure that this put on them to advance tuition funds. Their benefits also lowered the amount of guaranteed student loans they could access.

Once in the classroom, the veterans told us that they were confronted by culture shock for which they were not prepared. Some had to modify their speech around the other students and remind themselves not to curse in their everyday conver-

sations. They were surprised at their classmates' lack of attention, text messaging, giggling and complaining, especially in freshmen classes, and a few were asked questions like "how many people did you kill," which they found highly uncomfortable.

The veterans were also put off by the political views expressed by their professors. They made a distinction between professors presenting their political views as opinions versus presenting their political views within the context of the rest of the lecture material, making their opinions sound like facts. They found that other students accepted the professors' views regarding US policy in toto and it took a lot of courage to challenge them. The organizational culture of the military and the univer-

sity are very different, and it takes veterans time to adjust. They told us that they felt a lack of accountability within the university and could not find a true "chain of command." For example, if they had a complaint about a professor, they could not find anyone who appeared to be a "supervisor."

The veterans in our groups were not only adjusting to becoming university students, but were also still recovering from the physical and mental wounds of military service. One veteran told us that he was doing well until he received word of the death of one of his fellow servicemen in Iraq, which set him back in his college work. On the other hand, the veterans told us about the unique strengths that they bring to the university community, including maturity and motivation. They also contrasted their lack of interest in academics in high school, where most were focused on getting into the military, with their current level of attention and interest. As a group they identified with other returning students, such as older women returning to college after raising children, who may be very motivated but are in need of refresher courses in math and writing.

Focus group participants offered specific suggestions for changes that would make their transition to college considerably smoother. These included universities transferring military credits more easily and rationally, providing a checklist of university requirements with key deadlines, and including veterans as a group that is given attention during any Diversity Day or College 101 type of course. They also suggested that universities provide each veteran a mentor who is also a student veteran, but is two to three years ahead in college, who could "deconstruct" university culture for them and provide suggestions for how

to navigate the university successfully. We suggest that university bursar offices develop ways to designate which student accounts are pending GI Bill benefits, to avoid adding late charges and sending frequent tuition bills to the veterans. Zero interest loans for student veterans waiting for their GI benefits would be ideal.

The veterans expressed pride regarding their military history, but also recognized that the current war may not be popular with other students. They described ambivalence regarding how openly and frequently to reveal their experiences, and conveyed a need to organize a student veteran group on campus so that they could identify with their "brothers and sisters" in a supportive environment. Social networking websites could also be a convenient way for student veterans to support each other, both within a specific university and across institutions.

Veterans Day may be the perfect time in the academic calendar for university administration, faculty, staff and students to show their appreciation of the veterans attending their institution. One simple way to do this is for universities to announce how many undergraduates are in fact student veterans. Many veterans appear to be keeping a "low profile" and may be relieved, proud and feel less isolated in learning that there

TEACHING STRATEGIES

are more than 100 student veterans, for example, at their institution. The veterans we spoke to noted that many public colleges were greatly aided after WWII by an influx of veterans into the university system, and that this is an important history to remember and to keep in mind today. We suggest that all universities actively welcome the men and women who have risked their lives in our wars, and help them feel that they have truly come home to a community that values them.

Irene Glasser is a research associate at Brown University's Center for Alcohol and Addiction Studies, lecturer in anthropology (Roger Williams U), and professor emeritus of anthropology (Eastern Connecticut State U). She is involved in evaluation research on housing formerly homeless and formerly incarcerated communities and is the author of More Than Bread (1988), Homelessness in Global Perspective (1994) and Braving the Street (with Rae Bridgman, 1999).

John T Powers is a graduate student at Rhode Island College. He founded Operation Vets as a support network for New England veterans and their families, and is a co-founder and executive director of Student Veterans of America. Since 2007, he has supported veterans transitioning into higher education by establishing student veteran organizations and working with higher education institutions to improve services for veterans.

William Zywiak is a research scientist at PIRE and an expert on alcohol treatment outcome research. Glasser and Zywiak have collaborated in publications on substance abuse and homelessness. He is chair of the Nominations and Elections Committee of the American Psychological Association's Addictions Division, and a member of the Military Psychology Division. ■