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Framing a Veterans Syllabus Statement for Faculty Members

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Introduction

As student veterans and their dependents navigate the unfamiliar cultural terrain of colleges and universities, they rely on a chain of support, from the VA certifying official to the student services office to the faculty members providing instruction. Since the Post 9/11 GI Bill took effect in 2009, over a million student veterans and their dependents have enrolled in a college or university (Hart & Thompson, 2013, p. 346), and according to a report by the Student Veterans of America, these students have been more successful than their peers (Bogue, 2017, para. 4). Each student veteran persisted and completed their degree at a much higher rate (72%) than other adult learners (50%) and, on average, earned a higher GPA (3.35) than the national average (3.11) while pursuing “academically rigorous” fields like business, marketing, STEM, and health sciences (Bogue, 2017, paras. 4–6). This report suggests, contrary to stereotypes about veterans struggling on campus, they are actually thriving.

However, the military ethos to leave no one behind evinces a need for more support for the 28% of student veterans who did not achieve postsecondary success (Bogue, 2017). With student services for veterans in place for years on many campuses and more campuses adding veterans resource centers with dedicated space for veterans to relax in a culturally familiar atmosphere, additional support should come from faculty members. But too often, faculty members harbor stereotypical views about veterans and military families, and, like most civilians in the U.S., misunderstand this group. This piece focuses on the rhetorical effects of adding a syllabus statement that recognizes and supports veterans and military families, objections faculty members have had to adding such a statement, and an asset-based frame to recruit resistant faculty.

Rhetorical Effects of Syllabus Statements

According to disability studies scholars, syllabus statements of policy, such as those on disability and plagiarism, “function rhetorically and have consequences in terms of how students understand the classroom atmosphere, what they expect from the teacher’s relationship to students, and how they predict the semester will go for them” (Wood & Madden, 2014, para. 1). For students with disabilities, the accommodation statement signals a teacher’s ethos and attitude toward “issues of access,” and “represents one of the first (and perhaps few) points of contact with the instructor within which students with disabilities have the opportunity to disclose their accommodation needs” (Wood & Madden, 2014, para. 1). Student veterans, who may or may not have disabilities and may or may not disclose their veteran status, likewise search for clues in syllabus policies to guide their sense of the teacher, classroom, and semester. Hence, faculty members have the opportunity to “position [themselves] rhetorically as an instructor interested in creating an inclusive atmosphere and one who is willing to work on an individual basis to maximize [student] accessibility to [the] class” (Wood & Madden, 2014, para. 3). Faculty at colleges and universities with high veteran and military family populations have a similar opportunity to signal to these students an awareness of the complexities of military service and a willingness to work with students to maximize access.

When I joined the faculty at a veteran-friendly university with a high veteran population, in a mountainous western state culturally attuned to military service, I assumed recommending such a statement would be uncontroversial. In partnership with the Veteran Student Services Center on

campus, I arranged a faculty symposium on student veterans, where the syllabus statement was everyone's favorite takeaway from my presentation. The statement, which relies heavily on one written by Katt Blackwell-Starnes (qtd. in Hart & Thompson, 2013, p. 12), reads:

I am aware of the complexities of being a student veteran. If you are a veteran, on active duty, in the reserves, or a spouse or dependent, stay in contact with me if an aspect of your present or prior service makes it difficult for you to fulfill the requirements of the course. Training and drill schedules, calls to active duty, VA appointments, GI Bill disbursements, and other aspects of service can disrupt academic progress. If you make me aware of a complication, I will work with you and/or put you in contact with university staff who are trained to assist you. Campus resources for veterans, service members, and families are located in the Veteran Student Services Center The VSSC can be reached at

While popular at the faculty symposium, this statement garnered considerable skepticism from faculty in my department. Despite my explanation of this statement as a voluntary recommended practice, faculty perceived it as an imposition from a campus office, one more policy in a litany of policies, or a legal matter more than a matter of ethics. Other objections included a refusal to add length to already-long syllabi and a belief that veterans do or should already know about resources designated for them, making the statement unnecessary. Each of these objections ignores the rhetorical effects of being welcomed to a strange land in an official document, especially when military service conditions people to study official documents carefully.

The first statement, the claim "I am aware of the complexities of being a student veteran," gave faculty the most pause, as they did not feel aware of those complexities. For this group, military cultural competence training is especially beneficial. The Student Veterans of America (2016) has created a conversation simulator for faculty to impart military cultural competence; as of January 2016, 110 schools were using this valuable support training. For those willing to dive deeper, veterans of the post 9/11 wars have established a flourishing literary scene to compliment the many memoirs and YouTube videos published by veterans since 2004. Scholar and veteran Peter Molin (2017) provides the most comprehensive take on the literary scene via his blog, *Time Now* (acolytesofwar.com). Meanwhile, the journal *War, Literature, and the Arts* and the Veterans in Society conference offer two more venues for attaining military cultural competence. However, given the many demands on faculty members' attention, there may only be time to emphasize an asset-based approach to student veterans.

A welcoming attitude toward student veterans and their dependents can be cultivated by emphasizing their considerable assets as students. These assets include maturity; a sense of purpose or mission orientation; a readiness to learn and apply knowledge to solve problems; experience working in or leading teams to solve problems, sometimes in urgent, stressful situations; familiarity with military genres and styles of communication; and experience behaving as a professional member of a large organization (Lighthall, 2012; Hart & Thompson, 2013; National, 2015). While not all veterans bring all of these assets, many bring most. Indeed, as one veteran on my campus warned, student veterans can be so self-motivated that instructors should be careful not to overload them with too many extra tasks, which can lead to burnout and attrition. Collaboration between teacher and student to set expectations and develop accommodations (Wood & Madden, 2014), another good practice from disability studies, can prevent most problems and offers an opportunity for cultural exchange. This collaboration can lead to the instructor "learning about the military, war and combat, and servicemembers' experiences," which can "complement a campus's broader commitment to diversity and social understanding" (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009, p. 31). Further, an asset-based frame "produces an even better [perception] than portraying veterans as heroic," as it "begins to reorient

the way people think about how to best help” veterans returning from service by shifting the focus from charity [or accommodation] to opportunity” (as cited in Hart & Thompson, 2016, p. 360).

An asset-based approach is needed because it tends to be rare, while a deficit-based approach is common. In their research on faculty members and student veterans, Hart and Thompson (2013) found that while teachers may be aware of veterans on campus, most (civilian) faculty are not aware of campus resources for veterans and have not received training to help them understand veterans’ issues (p. 4, 6). If they have been trained, that training has likely focused on deficits, such as traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress, rather than assets, such as leadership experience, maturity, and professionalism (p. 4, 12). Deficit model training “fail[s] to engage in the nuances of military service, wars, careers, and disabilities” and thereby perpetuates stereotypes about veterans (p. 4): that all veterans are combat veterans, cis-hetero men, heroic, wounded, and/or dangerous. This narrow perspective fuels a trend of misunderstanding: The Pew Research Center (2011) reported that 84% of post-9/11 veterans say the public does not understand the problems they and their families face; 71% of civilians agreed. Misunderstood and stereotyped on campus, veterans may come to “sense that academia regards them as broken, willfully nonconformist, or unworkable in the college environment” and “react with understandable frustration, which puts them at risk for attrition” (Gann, 2012, p. 213). From the standpoint of military culture, a 28% attrition rate is far too high (Bogue, 2017, n.p.). Faculty members who wish to be supportive and inclusive can signal that attitude by including a syllabus statement for veterans.

Enriching campus with diverse perspectives, motivating and leading peers, solving problems under pressure: Through their experiences, veterans bring great assets to higher education. At schools with significant veteran and military family populations, faculty members who support this group in the first textual encounter the two are likely to have will be noticed. They may benefit from being a strong link in the chain of support by attracting more student veterans and their families, and thereby contributing to a virtuous cycle of postsecondary success.

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