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Student Veterans and the Transition to Higher Education: Integrating Existing Literatures

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Abstract

To address concerns about student veterans, including lagging BA attainment and troubling drop-out rates, researchers, policy-makers and practitioners would benefit from a more in-depth understanding of the processes student veterans undergo as they transition out of the military and into higher education. This paper synthesizes the literature related to the transition processes and post-secondary experiences of student veterans, nontraditional students, first-generation students, and under-represented minority students in order to identify points of convergence and divergence. These disparate literatures all recognize that the transition to higher education provides additional challenges, relative to the challenges faced by traditional students; however, over the past several decades a growing body of literature points to co-identity organizations – organizations that are centered around one aspect of a student’s identity – as one factor that has potential to ease adjustment to higher education. By integrating existing research focused on the groups of students noted above with the burgeoning literature on student veterans, future researchers can to conduct more informed research and policy-makers and administrators can be empowered to create more effective policies and programs.

Keywords: Higher Education; Student Veterans; Nontraditional Students; First-Generation Students; URM Students; Transition to College; Co-Identity Organizations

To address some of the concerns about student veterans’ success in higher education, researchers and policy-makers need to know more about the processes student veterans undergo as they transition out of the military and into higher education. The volume of veterans enrolling in postsecondary education for the first time – about 200,000 in 2015 alone – makes this even more urgent (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2017). Institutions of higher education are beginning to respond to needs with high impact practices targeted at student veterans (see Kappell et al., 2017); however, low reported rates of bachelor’s degree attainment and high rates of dropout and stop-out among returning veterans are areas of serious concern to researchers, policy-makers, and higher education professionals (see Cate, 2013 for a nuanced discussion of popular reporting on veteran educational persistence).

Since World War II, service in the U.S. military has been linked with the opportunity to access higher education, and this link has benefited both service members and U.S. society at large; student veterans have historically been key to global competitiveness and economic prosperity in the U.S. and they have the potential to be key in the present as well (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Lucas, 2006).¹ Yet, many contemporary veterans belong to demographic groups that have historically been underserved by institutions of higher education: first-generation and “nontraditional” students, low-

¹ See Bound and Turner (2002; 2003) and Canaday (2003) for a discussion of how this increased access to higher education may have been unequal for non-white and non-heterosexual Americans.

income students, and students of color. Consequently, greater attention to the disparate educational trajectories of student veterans is particularly warranted at a time when there are higher stakes and greater returns to higher education than ever before. By integrating existing research literature focused on nontraditional,² first-generation,³ and under-represented minority (URM)⁴ college students, and the benefits of participation in co-identity organizations with the burgeoning literature on student veterans, I enable future researchers to conduct more informed research and empower policy-makers and administrators to create transformational policies and programs.

I begin with a discussion of the differences and similarities between the transition to higher education for student veterans and other types of students mentioned above. Previous research on student veterans' transition to higher education has concentrated on how their experiences diverge from those of traditional college students; thus far, relatively few researchers have examined alignment between the transition experiences of student veterans and other groups of students. In contrast, this paper focuses on points of convergence with nontraditional, first-generation, and under-represented minority students. Next, I examine the role of co-identity organizations within the transition to higher education. Over the past several decades a growing body of literature points to co-identity organizations as one factor that can improve transition and adjustment to higher education for many groups of students. By co-identity organizations, I mean any organization, institutional safe-space, or student group that is centered around one or more aspects of identity, such as race/ethnicity, religion, sexuality, gender, ability/disability, marriage and parental status, age, or veteran status. From an institutional perspective, such organizations and activities may represent easy-to-implement and cost-effective interventions. Thus, this paper also considers how literature finding positive outcomes associated with participation in co-identity organizations can be applied to student veterans. Finally, I share my concluding thoughts and directions for future research.

Transitions to Higher Education

Time spent at college or university has long been seen as a key transitional and developmental period for young people (Astin, 1985, 1993; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Chickering & Schlossberg, 1995). The existing literature on transition to higher education typically focuses on first year experience and makes prodigious use of student development theory and models.

Schlossberg's transition theory (Chickering & Schlossberg, 1995; Schlossberg, 1984) focuses on how adults cope with the transitions they experience throughout life and is deeply rooted in psychology and counseling traditions. Schlossberg's work is intended for both individual students and college counselors and tends to emphasize individual responsibility and individual action in relation to a transition. The model also implies a focus on documenting student's individual transition to higher education rather than approaching the transition from a group perspective or with an experimental lens. This individual-level focus is a weakness of these types of studies, as it occludes

² There is some disagreement about the definition of this term. However, here I define nontraditional students in alignment with the National Center for Education Statistics definition as having one or more of the following characteristics: over the age of 24, delaying enrollment into postsecondary education, attending part time, being independent from parents, having dependents, working full time while enrolled, being a single parent, or having a GED or high school equivalent certificate (Radford, Cominole, & Skomsvold, 2015).

³ Defined as students whose parents had no college or post-secondary experiences (Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007).

⁴ This group typically includes African American, Latino/a, and Native American students.

many important institutional and group-level factors. Further, like many of the theories discussed in this paper, this approach focuses (both theoretically and empirically) on students early in their educational careers, meaning that it can provide little insight into persistence, retention, and time to degree. That said, the focus on college as a time of prominent transition is useful for those working with traditional students, who are likely to experience a variety of transitions during their college career, as well as other groups of students (e.g. nontraditional students and under-represented minority students) who may experience an even wider array of transitions during college.

Over time, the concept of engagement has become a central component of studies on college preparation, college experience, and student retention. Like Schlossberg's theory of transition, Astin's (1985) work on student involvement and engagement stems from student affairs and counseling traditions and focuses attention on the individual student's contribution to creating a higher education experience. Astin's (1985) Input-Environment-Output (I-E-O) model underscores the need to have an understanding of student characteristics upon their entry into an educational institution, the nature of the educational environments with which students come into contact, and student characteristics as they exit the institution. For traditional students, engagement begins in primary and secondary education and carries through higher education, with those most engaged in high school being the most likely to go on to college and eventually attain a degree. At the theoretical level, the I-E-O model neglects to account for veterans and other returning students whose educational careers are interrupted and whose inputs are more complex than the typical college freshman. Additionally, a college degree was not necessarily an aspiration for student veterans and other older students. Though many student veterans enter the armed forces as a temporary career, some veterans separated from the military involuntarily and, prior to discharge, considered the military to be their career of choice. This fact also decreases the utility of models that follow strict sequencing, as the relationship between input, engagement, and output may be more iterative than linear for student veterans.

Like traditional college students, many student veterans face barriers to higher education such as the need for remediation, financial issues, and the challenges of balancing school with other aspects of life. However, student veterans also experience a variety of unique barriers to higher education including mental health issues (PTSD, TBI, etc.), lack of information about G.I. Bill benefits upon discharge from military service, and the added challenge of transitioning from military life to civilian life (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Radford, 2009; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014).

Many researchers have identified the transition from military service to higher education as one of the major obstacles to degree attainment and have identified specific ways in which veterans' transition to higher education differs from traditional students' transition along several axes (Boettcher, 2017; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; McBain, Kim, Cook, & Snead, 2012; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014; Radford, 2009; Ryan, Carlstrom, Hughey, & Harris, 2011; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014; Vacchi & Berger, 2014; Wheeler, 2012). For example, veterans differ in terms of the reason for their transition to higher education. While traditional college students' pursuit of higher education is typically voluntary, veterans' transitions from military service to higher education are often more complicated, in many cases being necessitated by injury or circumstance.

As is the case for traditional college students, most researchers cite financial issues as having the most significant impact on student veterans' abilities to persist in higher education (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; McBain et al., 2012; Radford, 2009; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014; Wheeler, 2012). However, that is where the similarities between traditional students and student veterans end. The next most often cited challenges to student veterans transition to higher education are interpersonal and social challenges such as difficulties acculturating to campus

life, difficulties relating to student peers and campus faculty members, difficulties relating to family and friends after returning from service, and the loss of a sense of camaraderie (Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; McBain et al., 2012; Olsen et al., 2014; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014; Wheeler, 2012). Also frequently cited are physical, emotional, psychological issues (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014); difficulty balancing family responsibilities with school (Radford, 2009); and the burden of transitioning to multiple facets of civilian life after military service (Radford, 2009). Finally, bureaucratic challenges such as a lack of clear information regarding veterans' education benefits and difficulty transferring credits between institutions and general degree completion are also cited (Ackerman et al., 2009; McBain et al., 2012; Radford, 2009; Wheeler, 2012).

For traditional students transitioning to college, identity is often in flux, and interactions with peers and faculty/staff in the college environment can have an immense impact on identity development. Ebaugh (1988) argued that people living in the world today, in contrast to individuals in the past, tend to move into and out of many roles in the course of a lifetime. The theory of role exit examines the processes that individuals undergo when they must simultaneously learn a new role or position while withdrawing from the values, norms, and expectations of a prior role. Naphan and Elliot (2015) see role exit as particularly applicable to student veterans since the importance of disengagement from a previous role is magnified, as expectations of the previous role are unnecessary or inappropriate in the new role. However, the role exit framework may be inappropriate for use with some student veterans, because it presumes that role exits are voluntary. Role exit, though a useful contribution to identity transition theory, is problematic because it collapses the myriad transitions student veterans undergo and fails to account for multiple simultaneous transitions. Student veterans also differ from traditional students in that they experience a move from the role of working professional to that of student. Further, the transition to higher education involves a shift from a social context in which the military identity is widely known, appreciated, and shared, to a context with few military peers and a preponderance of individuals with little understanding of military culture.

Multiple dimensions of identity and intersecting identities (K. C. Jones, 2013; S. R. Jones & McEwen, 2000) have become increasingly common lenses through which to study college students. Jones and McEwen (2000) developed and tested a conceptual model of multiple dimensions of identity that depicts a core sense of self with intersecting circles surrounding the core identity representing significant identity dimensions (e.g., race, sexual orientation, religion) and contextual influences (e.g., family background and life experiences). The authors found support for the idea that identity development in college is a fluid and dynamic process rather than a linear one. Ultimately, they call for more research on this topic and suggest that educators exercise caution in making assumptions about the salience of particular identity dimensions for students in traditionally marginalized groups (S. R. Jones & McEwen, 2000). In particular, researchers of student veterans cite difficulties these students may have in reconciling multiple aspects of a veteran identity with a student identity and speculate that these difficulties impact academic outcomes (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

The concept of intersecting identities is perhaps the most useful of those presented above in relation to student veterans, but this line of research in relation to student veterans is still in its infancy. For example, numerous scholars of veterans have postulated that military identity becomes integrated into an individual's basic view of self (Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). This idea has some interesting consequences that sets student veterans apart from traditional college students. Thus, for student veterans, leaving the military involves reconceptualizing not only what they do, but also who they are and what they believe (see Jones,

2013 for a similar argument). Consequently, traditional approaches that assume all college students view higher education as a time to experiment with and develop multiple aspects of identity are often not applicable to many types of adult students. It is precisely these difference in pre-college input, social role, approach to identity formation, and overall life course stage that distinguish student veterans from traditional students, causing them to need different types of support and rendering research with traditional college students less applicable.

To ameliorate gaps in the extant literature on student veterans, researchers and policy-makers can look to bodies of literature related to groups of students that share many of the same characteristics as student veterans: nontraditional, first-generation, and URM students. Since the current wealth of literature on nontraditional, first-generation, and URM students was not yet developed during the last major influx of military veterans into higher education – after World War II – these bodies of literature can now be productively integrated into the body of literature on student veterans that has since developed. In the next section I address the ways in which student veterans and other groups of students with whom they share important characteristics diverge from traditional models.

Divergence and Alignment

While college attendance is recognized as a key transition period for most students, researchers acknowledge that these processes do not operate in the same manner for all types of students. As student bodies become more diverse at all types of higher education institutions, more attention has been paid to how transition processes operate for different types of students. There is some overlap between the experiences of traditional college students and student veterans; however, there is much more overlap between the transition experiences of nontraditional, first-generation, and URM students and those of student veterans, albeit in different ways. In this section, I illustrate points of convergence and difference between student veterans, nontraditional, first-generation, and URM students to demonstrate ways in which existing literatures can be applied to the case of student veterans to expand our understanding of this student group and inform better policies to support student veterans making the transition of higher education.

Financial Issues

Most researchers cite financial issues as having the most significant impact on student veteran's ability to persist in higher education (Ackerman et al., 2009; McBain et al., 2012; Radford, 2009; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014; Wheeler, 2012). As is the case for many nontraditional, first-generation, and under-represented minority students, material challenges can also be a significant issue for student veterans, due primarily to the decreasing affordability of a college education. Despite the financial benefits granted by the G.I. Bill, many studies of student veterans have found that financial difficulties are present for student veterans and can serve as a catalyst for them to leave their programs of study (DiRamio et al., 2008; Wheeler, 2012). Furthermore, although the Post 9/11 G.I. bill is a major advantage for veterans seeking college degrees, many sources point out that it does not rival the original G.I. bill in educational benefits provided (Greenberg, 2008). The current G.I. Bill's housing allowance is around \$1500 per month, dependent on zip code, with tuition benefits equal to "All Tuition and Fee Payments for an in-State Student," for 36 total months, and up to \$1000 yearly as a book stipend.⁵ This structure incentivizes today's veterans to attend public college in a state where they have residency status, which is a concern because it may have the effect of

⁵ www.VA.gov/gibill

restricting student veterans to attending public institutions and limits opportunity and social mobility for student veterans with residency in states with low quality or underfunded public universities. First-generation and nontraditional student groups are often much more geographically constrained by concerns about costs of relocation and out of state tuition, as well as by family and community responsibilities. First-generation students are more likely to enroll in lower cost institutions, and more likely to choose an institution that is close to their home (Saenz et al., 2007). We know that veterans are incentivized to attend public institutions in their state of residency, but we do not know what role proximity to a military base and proximity to military community – either through friendship networks from military service or through institutions that enroll large numbers of veterans – play in their choice of post-secondary institution. Additionally, with costs in mind, first-generation students are more likely to begin their postsecondary studies at a community college and later transfer to a four-year institution, meaning they must transition twice (Wurster, Rinaldi, Woods, & Liu, 2013). Of course, student veterans who follow this path must similarly make two educational transitions, in addition to navigating entrance into and exit from the military.

The rising cost of tuition, particularly the rising cost of private institutions above the cost of public institutions raises concerns about the affordability and accessibility of a college education even given G.I. Bill education benefits. In addition, many student veterans come from first-generation and/or from low-income backgrounds and both of these groups have been shown to be averse to taking on loans to cover the cost of education, which has a measurable effect on their choice of college institution and pathway, which in turn effect their educational attainment (Burdman, 2005). First-generation students are twice as likely to express concern over their ability to pay for college (Saenz et al., 2007); they also report that their main reason for attending college was “to make more money” and that “being well off financially” is an essential personal goal (Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007). Finally, first-generation students less likely to live on campus, similar to nontraditional students, and this leads to lower academic and social integration, which ultimately may lead to decreased educational attainment. With these commonalities between veterans and first-generation students in mind, the role of finances in veterans’ decision to pursue higher education, choice of institution, choice of major, and post-college plans all warrant further study.

Academic Preparation

Research suggests that first-generation students are more likely to have weaker academic preparation, lower educational aspirations, and less knowledge of the college application process, as compared to continuing-generation students (Saenz et al., 2007). Without parental guidance, students are more reliant upon high schools to educate them about postsecondary opportunities and provide support through the college and financial aid application processes (Saenz et al., 2007; Wurster et al., 2013). Student veterans, however, are farther-removed from both the advice of their parents and their high school counselors. Thus, student veterans are likely to decide what college or university to attend via other means. More research investigating this important decision-making process is desperately needed. In addition, studies of extra-curricular remediation programs would shed light on whether student veterans genuinely need academic remediation in the classroom (ex: because of poor high school performance and/or learning) or if short-term “refresher” programs are preferable (ex: if the student has simply forgotten knowledge that they learned in high school). Implementing refresher programs may be an effective way of helping veterans conserve their benefits and improve academic outcomes.

First-generation students’ lower self-ratings of leadership ability have also been shown to negatively impact persistence (Saenz et al., 2007). However, leadership ability and experience is one area where veterans do not typically struggle. One useful direction for future research would be to

investigate if and how service in the U.S. military reverses this self-conception among first-generation student veterans and what effect this might have on persistence.

Gaps in Education

One of the most significant factors affecting the transition to higher education is that nontraditional students do not proceed directly from high school to college or university. Like student veterans, nontraditional students experience a gap in their engagement with the education system. In fact, nontraditional college students often transition to the higher education environment from a previous career or from a full-time caretaker role. Thus, like student veterans, nontraditional students often have a primary identity as something other than a student. Nontraditional students may also have fully fledged spiritual, civic, social, and personal identities that are unlikely to change during their time at college or university. This makes theories of traditional student identity formation and institutional resources structured around them less applicable to nontraditional students and student veterans. However, both of these types of students may be attending college as part of a larger personal project of cultivating altered or expanded personal identities. Researchers should be careful not to overstate or take for granted the fixity of these students' identity.

Attrition

Nontraditional students are much more likely to leave during their first year of college – rather than later in their educational career – than traditional college students (Bowl, 2001; Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Radford, Cominole, & Skomsvold, 2015). Similarly, first-generation students are twice as likely to drop out during or after their first year of college, as compared to continuing-generation students (Saenz et al., 2007; Wurster et al., 2013). This suggests difficulties with the transition to higher education itself, rather than subsequent factors.

Bean and Metzner developed a conceptual model of nontraditional student attrition and found that the key difference between the attrition process for traditional and nontraditional students is that nontraditional students are more affected by external environmental factors (e.g., family responsibilities) than by social integration, which is a major factor affecting the attrition of traditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Metzner & Bean, 1987). Since nontraditional students typically hold adult roles and responsibilities in addition to their role as student, factors related to these other roles – particularly roles (like spouse or parent) considered more primary than student – can create conflict for nontraditional students, which in turn leads to increased attrition. This may also be the case for first-generation students, who often remain embedded in their home communities by virtue of attending college close to home.

Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004) found that socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, age, gender, marital status, parental status, total previous college credit earned, and goal commitment were all significant predictors of adult nontraditional student attrition. The authors found that other characteristics such as high school class rank, standardized test scores, college preparation curriculum, and high school friends were all less relevant to adult students' persistence. Bergman, Gross, Berry, and Shuck (2014) found no differences in persistence by gender, race/ethnicity, or age, but instead found that educational aspirations, institutional responsiveness, and familial encouragement all play significant positive roles in adult nontraditional student persistence. In contrast, Bowl's (2001) deep qualitative work points to the role of higher education institutions in nontraditional student attrition. She characterizes the nontraditional students as a "frustrated participant in an unresponsive institutional context" and calls for institutional change if

nontraditional students are to thrive (Bowl, 2001, p. 141).⁶ Thus, models of attrition among students with adult roles and responsibilities, like student veterans, must be sensitive to variation in importance of social integration and variation of institutional support for students with family responsibilities.

Risk Factors

Some research on nontraditional students finds differing outcomes based on the number of nontraditional factors present in an individual student. For example, according to this research, a student who is a single parent, is fully employed in addition to being a student, is over the age of 24, and attends school part time would be considered a maximally nontraditional student, while a student who is 30 years old, has no dependents, and attends school full-time would be considered only minimally nontraditional. Maximally nontraditional students are much less likely to persist in higher education (Radford et al., 2015) than either traditional students or minimally nontraditional students. However, studies have shown that even minimally nontraditional students (i.e., students with only one nontraditional characteristic) were less likely than traditional college students to attain a degree – 52% versus 64% – and they were also far more likely than traditional students to have left school without a degree and without re-enrolling – 35% versus 22% (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2015). Student veterans also vary from minimally to maximally nontraditional. Developing models to measure the impact of degree of nontraditionality on persistence among student veterans and comparing this to other nontraditional groups could prove a fruitful direction for future research.

Race/Ethnicity and Gender

There is also substantive overlap between student veterans and under-represented minority students. Roughly 30% of active duty military service members identify as non-white, and the federal government estimates that veterans of color will increase from the current population of just over 20% to 34% by 2040 (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2015; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs & Westat Inc., 2010). Thus, many student veterans also experience challenges common to URM students such as stereotyping, discrimination, harassment, feelings of isolation, and low retention rates. Given that the overlap between student veterans and URM students is certain to increase, research on student veterans must incorporate the scholarship on URM students. For example, stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995) is an issue for many students of color and student veterans may experience compounding stereotyping on the basis of race and veteran status. Tine and Gotlieb's (2013) empirical work on stereotype threat related to race, gender, and income among college students found negative effects on math performance on the basis of race and income-level, but not gender, and negative effects on working memory function on the basis of gender, race, and income. They also found that individuals with all three stigmatized aspects of identity experienced significantly larger stereotype threat effects than those with zero-, one-, or two-

⁶ Some of the differences in these findings can be explained by the authors' definition of nontraditional student. For example: Metzner and Bean (1987) and Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004) focused commuter or part-time students; Bergman, Gross, Berry, and Shuck (2014) studied students over the age of 25 enrolled in bachelor's degree programs; and Bowl (2001) studied working-class students over the age of 25 entering higher education for the first time. All of these population specifications fit student veterans to some extent, but Bowl's population seems to most closely mirror the characteristics of student veterans, making her findings about the role of institutional in nontraditional student attrition most applicable.

stigmatized aspects of identity. Of course, student veterans are not all students of color or low-income students, however work on stereotype threat may be additionally applicable to the population because of potential (or perceived) negative student and faculty attitudes about military service and veterans. Researchers would benefit from taking an intersectional approach to thinking about the ways in which gender, race/ethnicity, and veteran status intersect to produce unique experiences.

Both nontraditional and first-generation students, like student veterans, are more likely to have dependents and extensive family obligations, which may interfere with their pursuit of higher education (Langrehr, Phillips, Melville, & Eum, 2015; Wurster et al., 2013). Bean and Metzner (1985) and Bowl (2001) both argue specifically that gender should be taken into account in models of nontraditional student attrition, both because gendered family roles and obligations may fall disproportionately on women and because mature students' family lives and concerns do not constitute background noise against which education takes place, rather these concerns are integral to nontraditional students' experience of higher education. This is an excellent suggestion; however, it may be more productive to focus on the roles themselves (e.g., primary parent or caretaker), rather than the gender of the role-holder, and how various competing demands affect persistence for nontraditional students. This is particularly true for student veterans who are still disproportionately men (though numbers of women veterans are increasing), but who may have increased home and family responsibilities when they return home after military service.

Studies of veteran students' attrition would benefit from increased attention to gendered patterns in the influence of role and identity on persistence. Baechtold and DeSawal's (2009) research on women student veterans on college campuses productively applies an intersectional approach to student veterans. They convincingly argued that as the number of women veterans attending college increases, as it has done over the past decade, campus professionals need to be aware of how issues pertaining to mental health, sexual assault, and gender identity may influence how these women make transitions to higher education. Further research on sub-groups of veterans (e.g., veterans with dependents, women veterans, veterans of color, first-generation student veterans, LGBT veterans, and veterans with disabilities) is necessary in order to parse the veterans experience and to create services for those individuals whose needs and identities fall at the intersection of salient categories.

Culture Clash

For some URM students, the transition to higher education produces feelings of culture shock. This is particularly true of first-generation students, who may not even have indirect experience of the higher education system from their parents or other older relatives. For URM students, identity development has historically been tied to ideas of assimilation into and/or exclusion from campus culture. Kuh and Love (2000) postulated that persistence in higher education is inversely related to the distance between a student's precollege culture and the campus culture, and that students from cultures that are incongruent with the dominant culture of their campus may either acclimate to that dominant culture or seek membership in one or more subcultures. Tierney (1999), similarly, critiqued theories of assimilation into campus culture and argued that requiring students to sever ties with home cultures is a form of cultural suicide. Instead, he theorized cultural integrity, which emphasizes programs that foster cultural validation by engaging students' racial and ethnic backgrounds, as an alternate perspective. Other researchers have also called for approaches that help students of color construct identities that include educational achievement as both desirable and achievable to help combat the negative messages they receive (Oyserman, Harrison, & Bybee, 2001).

Student veterans, like many URM students, come from cultures that are incongruent with the dominant culture. Not only are many student veterans members of an under-represented ethnic group, these students do not transition directly from their home culture, rather they make a (sometimes incomplete) transition from home culture to military culture to (sometimes home culture again and then to) campus culture. Military culture differs from campus cultures in myriad ways: attitudes toward hierarchy, questioning authority, civil discourse, and even punctuality and time all differ between the two environments. Thus, literature about culture shock and dissonance between pre-college and campus cultures is doubly applicable to literature on student veterans: it is directly applicable to URM student veterans, and it is also indirectly applicable to student veterans transitioning from military culture to campus culture. Further, researchers should study whether URM student veterans are at a greater disadvantage than other URM students or whether the experience of transitioning from home to military culture “inoculates” them against some of the worst effects of culture shock when transitioning to college.

Peer support

Social support from peers and participation in student activities and organizations have been shown to be strong predictors of academic success among African American students (Guiffrida, 2003; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler (1996) found that peer support was predictive of college outcomes for Latino/a students. Interestingly, Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco (2005) found that Latino/a and Asian college student’s perceived lack of peer support was more predictive of college outcomes than the presence of actual support. Researchers of student veterans also emphasize the role of peer support (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Ryan et al., 2011) but rarely engage with scholars of URM students studying the role of peer support. In a contradicting study, Elliott (2014) did not find any lasting mental health benefits for student veterans of the social support received from peers during military service. However, this may be because the veterans disperse (in terms of both life trajectory and geography) after service, and perhaps it would be useful to investigate mental health benefits of the social support received from veteran peers in college.

General Insights

The nontraditional student literature demonstrates the importance of carefully defining and specifying a research population. Although “student veteran” is generally a better-defined category than “nontraditional student,” researchers must still be attentive to differences within this group and reject research that seeks to define a totalizing “student veteran experience.” In addition, the focus on both individual and structural explanations and the role of institutions in promoting or hindering student success is a real strength of the nontraditional student literature, and one that researchers of student veterans should endeavor to include to in future research.

Notably, first-generation students are overrepresented among student veterans, with 66% of combat veterans who responded to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in 2010 reporting that they were first-generation (Wurster et al., 2013). Thus, the literature on student veterans becomes increasingly negligent if it ignores the overlap between student veterans and first-generation students. Nowhere is this more important than with regard to financial issues. Many scholars of student veteran experience take for granted that the G.I. Bill provides financial support to veterans in qualified educational programs; however, the literature on first-generation students makes it clear that the G.I. Bill does not completely level the playing field with regard to institutional choice.

Additionally, as U.S. military veterans become more diverse, the literature on URM students becomes increasingly directly applicable to student veterans. Research on stereotype threat, discrimination, and other negative factors related to attrition are clearly applicable to studies of both white student veterans and student veterans of color, as is research on positive factors like the importance of social support from peers and ideas of cultural integrity rather than cultural assimilation. However, for both URM students and student veterans, having access to formal co-identity organizations on campus can help them overcome barriers and make the most of their unique resources and support structures.

The Role of Co-Identity Organizations

A growing body of research suggests that co-identity organizations can positively contribute to the experiences and outcomes of racial/ethnic and other minority students (Braxton, 2000; Gonzalez, 2000; Guiffrida, 2003; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Inkelas, 2004; G. D. Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2007; Museus, 2008; Museus, Yi, & Saelua, 2017). Examples of such organizations include African Students Coalition, Muslim Students Organization, LGBTQ Resource Center, The Deaf and Hard of Hearing Club, Women's Student Association, and Student Veterans of America.

Ethnic student organizations provide college students with a safe environment for the transition to higher education because they serve as a safe space for cultural familiarity, cultural expression and advocacy, and opportunities for cultural validation (Museus, 2008). Similarly, LGBT organizations have been found to increase the comfort of LGBT students on campus and to lead to positive identity development and empowerment (Stevens, 2004). In fact, co-identity organizations seem to produce many positive experiences and may have the ability to positively effect education outcomes for students transitioning to higher education, but there is currently no research on veteran's organizations and the role they play for student veterans in the transition to higher education. Additionally, much of the research on co-identity organizations uses qualitative methods and small sample sizes. This is, in and of itself, not a problem; however, having quantitatively oriented studies would serve to strengthen this promising literature.

Researchers have found that ethnic student organizations offer a critical venue for the social involvement of students of color at majority white institutions. For example, Guiffrida (2003) found that African American students credited such organizations with facilitating their social involvement at a majority white institution. African American students in two recent studies reported that the most important benefits of participating in such organizations were the opportunities the organizations provided for establishing connections with faculty members, giving back to the African American community (both on-campus and in society at large), connecting with African American peers, improving cross-cultural competencies (Guiffrida, 2003; Harper & Quaye, 2007). Since most higher education institutions can be described as "majority civilian" rather than "majority veteran/military," these studies have particular relevance for to facilitate veterans' social involvement on campus.

Some researchers of co-ethnic organizations have also found more direct ties to persistence in higher education. Gonzalez (2000), identified three elements of the campus culture that conveyed messages of devaluation and exclusion to Chicano students at majority white institutions – including the exchange of knowledge, physical structures, and social interactions – and then identified sources of support that aided those students in navigating negative cultural messages, including Chicano student identity organizations, cultural symbols, faculty, and literature. Qualitative evidence from Braxton (2000) also suggests that low graduation rates among racial/ethnic minority students might be due in part to their inability to find membership in the cultures and subcultures of majority white

colleges and universities. Finally, Patton (2006) notes that black Cultural Centers are instrumental in both black students' feelings of belonging on campus and in the transition to college for black first-year students.

Museus' (2008) phenomenological qualitative work shows how ethnic student organizations can engage minority students' cultural backgrounds and aid them in maintaining strong ties with their own cultural heritages while facilitating their socialization into the campus. Museus' main findings were: that institutional subcultures can be critical in facilitating minority student adjustment and membership, that participation in ethnic student organizations may be an important form of social involvement for African American students, and that ethnic organizations can provide venues for black students' acquisition of cross-cultural communication skills. These findings provide additional qualitative support for the findings of Kuh and Love (2000), Guiffrida (2003), and Harper and Quaye (2007) respectively. I postulate that these positive outcomes experienced by students of color who interact with co-ethnic organizations may be generalizable to many marginalized student groups, including student veterans participating in veterans' organizations.

With these positive outcomes in mind, Museus (2008) recommends that higher education administrators focus on maximizing the extent to which they connect students of color to venues where they can share their experiences with their peers, support one another, and work together to meet common challenges. He also tasks future research with examining the role that other types institutional cultures – such as cultural centers and targeted support programs – play in students' adjustment to higher education institutions. In light of evidence that participation in co-identity organizations can benefit students in terms of identity development, retention, and other positive outcomes, I echo these recommendations and add that more empirical work is still needed to explain the mechanisms behind participation in co-identity organizations and positive student outcomes. Considering the many points of alignment between student veterans and nontraditional and URM students, cultural centers and support programs targeted at veterans might also be beneficial for their transition to higher education.

Co-identity organizations have yet to be studied in relation to student veterans, yet many colleges and universities have centers for veteran student services. Currently, about 62% of institutions of higher education have programs and services specifically for student veterans (McBain et al., 2012). Within the 62% of institutions that offer programs and services for veterans, 78% of public four-year institutions reported having a designated veteran/military student organization, while 52% of private not-for-profit four-year institutions reported having such organizations (McBain et al., 2012). Considering the numerous benefits of bachelor's degree attainment, both to individuals and to society, and the historic positive economic impact of large numbers of veterans earning a BA degree, researchers, policy-makers, and higher education professionals should be invested in improving the educational attainment of veterans and in transforming institutions to promote this goal.

Directions for Future Research

By integrating existing literatures on other groups of students in higher education with the burgeoning literature on student veterans, we can enable future researchers to conduct more informed and targeted research related to student veteran educational outcomes. The literatures on nontraditional, first-generation, and URM students in particular show considerable potential to advance the literature on student veterans in higher education. The literature on nontraditional students – particularly on nontraditional student attrition – demonstrates the vital importance of attending to differences within a diverse group of students. The literature on first-generation students highlights issues of finances and academic preparation, particularly in relation to their choice of post-

secondary institution. And, the literature on URM students showcases the importance of peer support and the negative effects of stereotype threat on student persistence and attrition. In addition, one of the strengths of the literature on nontraditional, first-generation, and URM students is the more structural take on what accounts for persistence and attrition among students than the dominant theories used by researchers of student veterans. Research on student veterans tends to foreground individual explanations of persistence in higher education but the research on nontraditional, first-generation, and URM students demonstrates the importance of attending to institutional cultures. Further, co-identity organizations, which have a documented positive impact on various groups of students in higher education, have heretofore unrealized potential to be a transformative intervention for student veterans entering higher education. Thus, future researchers should pay careful attention to student veteran co-identity organizations. Though integrating literatures on nontraditional, first-generation, and URM students can help fill many gaps in the literature on student veterans in higher education, several questions relating specifically to student veteran educational experiences and outcomes demand further investigation.

Future research must attend to students at various stages of higher education. Longitudinal studies that follow individuals and groups of students through their full higher education careers would be particularly beneficial. Additionally, issues of transition from year to year in college, transition between institutions, and transfer to a different institutional type merit further study in order to realize positive institutional transformation. However, because 43% of students who served in the military and who now attend college do so at public two-year institutions, more studies of student veterans at the community college level would also be welcome, as would a study of the differences in availability of veteran's organizations by institutional type (Jones, 2017; Persky & Oliver; Wheeler, 2012). Such studies could improve research on student veteran persistence and retention – two areas that are of major concern to researchers of various groups of students in higher education.

Additionally, there is little research on the role that faculty and staff can play in the transition to higher education with regard to student veterans. However, there is evidence from studies of traditional college students that positive interactions with faculty contribute to student success, and conversely, that students who do not have positive interactions often feel less connected to the institution and are less content with their campus (Kuh et al., 2007; Tinto, 2012). Recently, researchers of veterans in writing and composition have provided a roadmap of curricular and professional development activities aimed at helping faculty make a positive impact on veteran success in higher education, which include making room for student's prior experience and knowledge within the classroom and using an asset-based framework for faculty professional development related to student veterans rather than a deficit-based one (Hart & Thompson, 2016; Hinton, 2013). Future research should expand this type of work into other academic fields. While studies have examined the supportive role of counseling staff, librarians, and faculty members, there are no studies in which researchers examine the role of veteran's services staff members. This could yield particularly valuable insights, as all student veterans who use G.I. Bill benefits at a college or university must "certify" their course schedules with a VA official at the institution each term.

One of the most significant limitations in the study of student veterans has been the lack of current nationally representative data about this group. One major consequence of this is that most studies of student veterans in higher education are qualitative in method and descriptive in nature. Fortunately, the recent report by Cate et al. (2017) has begun to remedy that lack. Additional comparative studies (comparing student experiences at different institutions, comparing subgroups of student veterans, and other comparisons) would also build the literature substantially. Qualitative studies are absolutely essential to arrive at a deep understanding of student veterans' motivations,

meaning-making, and lived experiences; however, all researchers of student veterans would benefit from more quantitative information from a variety of sources about student veterans' educational outcomes, including graduation and transfer rates, as well as individual level information like SES, gender, race/ethnicity, disability status, enrollment pattern, class year equivalent or credits earned, among others.

In short, additional research on a wide variety of topics would be a positive development for the future of this literature. However, one can find a cautionary tale in Winkle-Wagner's (2015) study of African American women's lives and her finding that they may be damagingly "narrowed down" in research that includes them through 1) an emphasis on individual factors in college success instead of institutional factors or larger structural issues, 2) a lack of analysis of within group difference, and 3) framing the notion of success as persistence or completion of a student's degree program instead of self-identified or unique notions of success such as collective uplift, wellbeing, or satisfaction. To positively transform institutions of higher education, researchers, administrators, and policy-makers must always be attentive to structural factors that may be at play, the important differences within the student veteran population, and student veterans' own notions of success in higher education.

Finally, the literature on student veterans has thus far only employed the wider body of literature on transitions to college for its own development, without contributing much to these literatures. In the future, it is my hope that the literature on student veterans can also build the wider body of literature on post-secondary transitions. What can researchers of transitions to college learn from examining student veterans and the transitions they experience? How can the student veteran literature be integrated with the literature on nontraditional students and URM students? What can research on student veteran experience in co-identity organizations contribute to the wider body of research on co-ethnic and other types of co-identity organizations? Although the literature on student veteran organizations holds incalculable potential contribute to these wider bodies of literature, that potential has yet to be tapped.

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