



Student Veterans' Perceptions of Barriers, Support, and Environment at a High-Density Veteran Enrollment Campus

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Abstract

For institutions of higher education with high numbers of enrolled veterans, understanding how these students perceive services specifically designed for them is an important next step in developing effective campus service models. Through analysis of survey data (n=328) collected at a campus with a host of established services and a high number of military connected students, this study adds to the literature on the transition experience and utilization of resources. This investigation focuses on the interaction between prior-military and disability characteristics and how service-connected injuries impact student-veterans' quality of life, integration on campus, and challenges with the built campus environment. Findings are discussed through the lens of a seminal transition framework, with practical application strategies offered for creating and delivering individualized support for student veterans.

Keywords: veteran, student-veteran, disabilities, transition, accommodations, faculty

Introduction

Institutions are seeing veteran enrollments increase, with as many as 3.6 million benefits-eligible Post-9/11 veterans enrolling by academic year 2019 (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2015). This increased enrollment creates a circumstance in which it is vitally important to accurately identify student veteran needs and understand how military experiences impact their transition, learning, and success. Given the relative novelty of many services developed on campuses across the nation, research into how students are using and perceiving targeted services can provide formative information for continued improvement. In particular, understanding veteran perceptions of these—oftentimes new—services can ensure that institutions, professionals, and faculty do not succumb to the “more is better” mentality for support services and instead recognize that supporting successful military to civilian transitions should be centered around veteran perspectives. Additionally, extant research has called for more consideration of diversity within the student veteran population and how individual circumstances may impact the efficacy of campus support services (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Vaccaro, 2015). This call further amplifies the need to examine support services from the perspective of student veterans in order to effectively identify the relationship between student veteran diversity and the range of services available.

This study builds upon previous research surrounding student veterans transitions by examining student veteran perceptions of campus supports, challenges faced in their transition, and indicators of support from faculty, all within an environment where multiple veteran-specific support services exist. Few empirical studies have investigated student veteran perceptions of supports specifically designed for them, while simultaneously accounting for prior military and disability characteristics (Oberweis & Bradford, 2017; Radford, 2010). Further, this study seeks to add to the literature on the interaction between prior-military and disability characteristics and how service-connected injuries (SCI) impact student-veterans' quality of life, integration on campus, and their challenges with the built campus environment. The research relies on an established model for college transition (Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989) and is coupled with reflection on a recent multi-institution study on student veteran transitions (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Further, the counseling model from Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg (2011), provides an applicable framework for developing individualized support and advising for student veterans.

Research Context and Framework

An extensive review of this literature is not within the purview of this paper; however, some key works are introduced here to provide context for this research. There is a growing focus of scholarly inquiry into student veteran enrollment in higher education (McBain, Cook, Kim, & Snead, 2012; Zhang, 2017; Zoli, Maury, & Fay, 2015) and educational outcomes (Cate, Lyon, Schmeling, & Bogue, 2017; Holder, 2011; Williams-Klotz & Gansemer-Topf, 2017). Vacchi and Berger (2014) provide a thorough examination of the history of student veterans on campus, and DiRamio's (2017) edited volume presents a "second wave" of research focusing on academic success factors including persistence, retention, degree completion, and post-graduation employment. Important findings and established themes identified regarding transition experiences of Post-9/11 student veterans include: the role of age differences between student veterans and other students, limitations of financial resources, cultural barriers stemming from a lack of faculty understanding of veteran experiences and military culture, and the complexities of balancing family and returning to school (Cook & Kim, 2009; Elliot, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2011; Hamrick & Rumann, 2012; Mendez, Witkowsky, Morris, Brosseau, & Nicholson, 2018; Morris, Gibbes, & Jennings, 2018; Radford, 2011; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014; Lim, Interiano, Nowell, Tkacik, & Dahlberg, 2018; Elliott, et al., 2011).

Important in any discussion of student transition to college is first- to second-year retention. Recent studies examining student veteran retention find Post-9/11 veterans are retained at higher rates than the general student population (Lang & O'Donnell, 2017). However, specific institutional support impacts on retention are still being examined empirically. This is important, as the persistence of student veterans remains a key indicator of success with diverse arrays of support services highly associated with retention.

Theoretical framework

Schlossberg et al. (1989), define four categorical factors impacting individuals during a life transition: (a) situation, (b) self, (c) supports, and (d) strategies. This model has been applied previously to veteran transition (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell 2008; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011). The "Four S model" is used in Griffin and Gilbert's (2015) study of institutional supports and barriers for student veterans at seven institutions ranging from low to high enrollments (i.e., institutions with 5,000 to 45,000 enrolled students). Findings from their work yield a set of recommendations for campuses to consider when developing or offering student support services (Table 1). From their findings, we have identified specific focal areas to address in this study (as indicated with an asterisk in Table 1, next page). Our research aims to investigate individual and diverse student perspectives as they related to existing support offerings.

Table 1: Summary of Four S model applied to military to civilian transition by Griffin & Gilbert (2015).

Situation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Understand and address financial concerns 2. Allocation of transfer credit system/policy for military service 3. Provide a point person for veteran resources 4. Providing resources for point person to facilitate advocacy, educate the campus, and lead policy initiatives
Support	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provide peer support opportunities 2. Understand the gap/divide between veterans and traditional students 3. Understand how diversity and identity-salience (specifically veteran identity) impacts support needs*
Self	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Consider diversity in developing veteran self-efficacy strategies (range of disabilities, gender, age, etc.)* 2. Understand that veterans often don't self-identify 3. Identify gaps in tracking and understanding how to reach veterans, and address those gaps*
Strategies	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Establish one-stop veteran office with coordinated resources 2. Create dedicated space(s) for veterans to connect and share "insider knowledge" 3. Provide multiple opportunities for veterans to connect with one another*

* asterisks represent focal areas in this study as they relate to the service model at the research site/institution.

Anderson, et al. (2011) also utilize the Four S model to provide guidance for counselling someone through a major life transition. Specifically, they offer a series of questions and considerations for guiding someone in a counseling or advising context. Drawing from Griffin & Gilbert (2015), and integrating an established transition guidance framework (Anderson et al., 2011), our aim here is to provide a reflection of the efficacy and response to established best practices for campus veteran support services and offer strategies for counseling and guiding student veterans through their transition.

Methods

Survey methodology is an established approach used to gain insight into student veteran perceptions, discern patterns of enrollment, and examine relationships (Livingston, et al., 2011; Williams-Klotz & Gansemer-Topf, 2017; Zoli et. al, 2015). The aim with this methodology is to identify common perceptions, while isolating patterns among diverse sub-populations within the student veteran community.

Research site

The research setting is a medium-sized regional research university situated in the West, hereafter referred to as research institution (RI). In fall 2017, 1,678 students had a direct armed forces connection (i.e. veterans, active duty, reserves) while an additional 548 students utilized

benefits as family members. The institution is located near several military installations and is embedded in what is considered a military community, with high proportions of local population connected to the military. As a result of the community culture, institutional mission, and emphasis on campus military support, a host of services have been developed and implemented in the last five years. For example, the institution has a well-equipped student veteran center with multiple staff members, a mandatory orientation program for military students, a military-credit transfer process, a first-year seminar for military students, and a voluntary faculty/staff training program. As such, this study evaluates the student-veteran perception of a range of initiatives intended for veterans, rather than a broad examination of services and support mechanisms designed for all students.

Research questions

This study explores core issues related to transition and campus integration among student veterans, with the aim of building a deeper understanding of student needs, perceptions of campus, and their own challenges and supports. While accounting for common and unique characteristics of this group we examine how student veterans perceive available campus support structures, including targeted services specifically for this population, and the institutional/cultural context for utilization of these supports. Specifically, the following questions are posed:

1. What are the background characteristics of student veterans and how do common and unique characteristics shape their transition to campus?
2. What are the perceptions of sources of support for student veterans on campus?
3. What challenges are student veterans facing in the transition to higher education?
4. How can college/university faculty help student veterans in their transition to campus?

Survey instrument

After receiving IRB approval, the survey instrument, comprised of 35-items, was administered via web-based questionnaire to the entire student veteran population at the RI during the spring 2017 semester. This questionnaire was guided by similar instruments designed to gather information on student veteran transition to the university and the civilian world instruments, such as the Survey of Veteran and Military Students (Williams-Klotz & Gansemer-Topf, 2017; Zoli et al., 2015). Our instrument included blocks of questions on demographic and military service information, perceptions of campus services, perceptions of faculty and staff helpfulness, perceptions of their own service-related injuries and quality of life, and levels of participation in Post-9/11 veteran organizations or other support groups (see Appendix A to review a copy of the survey). To improve and validate the survey, the following three techniques were employed:

Cognitive interviewing and pilot testing: Upon development of the instrument, a group of student veterans (n=12) took the pilot survey and were invited to a luncheon to discuss the survey instrument; they were asked to share their thoughts about each item. Inquiries were made into what each question meant, survey comprehension and consistency, meaning of “military” language, and overall evaluation of the survey time, satisfaction, and difficulty. Given the prevalence of SCIs in the veteran community, the research team was intentional and thoughtful about the risk of upsetting questions. Through these processes, seven questions were modified for clarity, two questions were removed, and item scales were adjusted throughout the instrument.

Expert review and content relevance: With regard to “military” language and transition experience, two members of the research team are Post-9/11 veterans and provided their personal insight into question wording and relevance. Additionally, previously deployed and validated survey instruments were reviewed as a foundation for question consideration.

Instrument Reliability: Finally, to assess the reliability of the survey instrument, we calculated an internal consistency statistic, Cronbach alpha, for the sub-scales included in the survey, including 1) Family and Peer Support, 2) Instructor/Professor Support, 3) Campus supports, and 4) Campus Accessibility. Each subscale included at least three questions related to the topic, and three of the four scales met the conventionally accepted standard of $> .75$ (Cortina, 1993).

Data

The incentivized survey (\$5 gift card) rendered a sample of 328 respondents (20% of population). Using commonly accepted sample size calculation guidance (95% confidence level and 5% margin of error estimate), an estimated 314 participants were needed to sufficiently represent the population of 1,700 veterans or military members actively enrolled at RI's campus (Dillman, Smythe, & Christian, 2009). With 328 respondents, the sample gathered for this study is representative of the population of veterans on campus, and findings can reasonably be generalized to the population of veterans at RI. The scope of the study limits the participant pool to student veterans who are currently or were recently university students. In addition to the quantitative data collected from the survey items, two questions included open-ended response options. Of the respondents, about 30% ($n = 94$) provided responses used in the qualitative analysis. The open-ended survey questions were inductively coded independently by the first two authors. Subsequently the coding schemes (i.e., both themes and number of instances) were compared and reconciled into a single refined set of themes. The results from one of these open-ended questions can be seen in Table 5 (page 188) and the emergent themes discussed at length on pages 189–194.

Results

Results from the analysis will be presented sequentially by research question.

RI: What are the background characteristics of student veterans and how do common and unique characteristics shape their transition to campus?

Survey questions aimed to examine student backgrounds, experiences in the military, and individual-transition experiences. The survey sample consisted of 65% male respondents along with 33% female and 1% choosing other or non-response. This reflects a higher proportion of females than the 15% found in the active-duty population (Parker, Cilluffo, & Stepler, 2017), but less than the proportion of women students at RI (53%). In terms of ethnicity, the sample was predominantly white (72%), with Hispanic, multiple, and Black students comprising 23% of the sample; another 5% of sample participants identified as Asian American or Native American. Racial and ethnic minority groups made up 40% of Defense Department active-duty military in 2015 and 33% of the student body at RI. This indicates that the sample consists of more white participants than the broad military population (Parker, Cilluffo, & Stepler, 2017) and RI. When asked if education was a main consideration for joining the military, just over half of respondents (169) answered “yes.” Regarding relationship status, most of the sample indicated they were married or living with a significant other (64%); twenty-two percent reported they were single. Twenty-nine students (9%) indicated they were divorced.

Type of service and separation

Results from the survey about military branch and type of service indicated higher proportions of students had served on active duty (90% active, rather than reserve or guard), in either the Army or Air Force (53% and 27% respectively), with Navy and Marines making up the remainder of the sample. Approximately 10% of the sample indicated that they had served in either a company or field grade officer position. The remaining 90% of the sample (293 students) left the service as junior enlisted to senior enlisted. Categorically, the largest number of respondents were

junior non-commissioned officers (162 students or 76% of the sample). On average, students served nine years in the military, with a sample median of seven years.

For this project we were interested in separation from the service and how that might relate to adjustment to the civilian world and higher education. When asked about the circumstances around separation, students indicated multiple reasons. Table 3 (next page) shows a categorical breakdown of types of separation. Approximately 38% of the survey respondents (n=130) separated from the service due to unplanned reasons (e.g. medical or administrative).

Table 3. Reasons for military separation

What were the circumstances around your separation from the military?

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
ETS (End of Service)	158	48%	48%
Medical	77	23%	72%
Retirement	40	12%	84%
Other	34	10%	94%
Prefer not to say	11	3%	98%
Administrative	8	2%	100%
Total	328		

Injuries and perception of disability

A block of questions addressed types of injuries incurred while in service, where and how the injuries occurred, and perceptions of how these injuries impact their daily lives. From the sample, 65% of respondents (n=214) indicated they had incurred a SCI. A large proportion of those students (66% or 148 students) indicated that their injury was physical in nature. However, almost half of those students with physical injury also indicated a psychological or brain injury, (n=72), an expected finding given the nature of military service and exposure to traumatic experiences (Vacchi & Berger, 2014).

Regarding psychological injuries, 81 students (36%) indicated they experienced posttraumatic stress related to their military service. When asked about other psychological symptoms (e.g. anxiety, depression, survivor's guilt), 92 students (41%) indicated "yes," with 36 (17%) indicating they experienced a traumatic brain injury (TBI). Students could enter open-ended responses for "other," and most of the 36 who chose this option indicated a pattern of wear on their bodies as the nature of the injuries. Example responses include "Twenty years of jumping out of airplanes," "day to day wear and tear," or simply "career." Further, a handful of students preferred not to disclose this information and one indicated sexual violence as the source of injury.

As for perceptions of disability, 15% of students answered "yes" to whether they felt others can easily notice their injury. A slightly higher percentage (18% of those who had a SCI) felt like they stick out in the classroom because of their injury. When the sub-set of students who indicated a

SCI (223) were asked if they ever refer to themselves as disabled, approximately half answered “never,” while 42% answered ‘sometimes’ and 8% answered “always.”

Additionally, the authors were interested in perceptions of quality of life and its relationship with SCIs. The SCI group indicated moderate to high levels of impact on their quality of life. On a four-point scale, with one being not at all and four being very-much, student ratings averaged 2.9. Figure 1 (below) shows student responses to this question on the four-point scale. A follow-up question asked students how their quality of life has changed over time due to their injuries. Over half the students (55% or 123 students) indicated that their quality of life had worsened over time due to their injury. A much smaller proportion indicated an improvement (11% or 25 students) and 34% indicated no change. Finally, to learn more about the impact of the injury, the survey contained a question addressing whether experiencing an SCI impacts the individual universally or only in specific situations. A majority of students indicated that their injuries impacted them in all situations, while 34% indicated that the impact of their injuries was situation specific.

What extent has your injury affected your quality of life

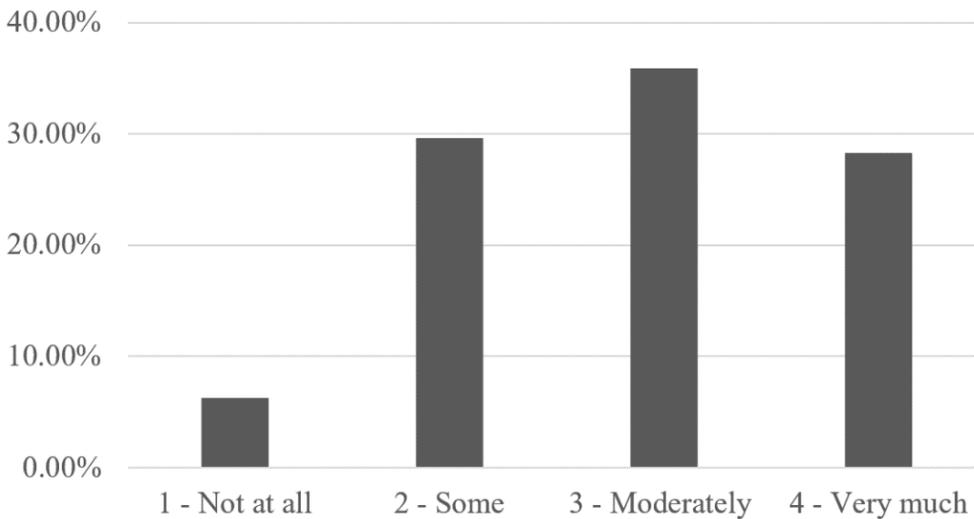


Figure 1. Impact of injury on quality of life

Examining the sample’s demographic and background characteristics, we found that a typical student veteran at RI is 25-35 years old, married or cohabitating, and served as either a junior enlisted or junior non-commissioned officer. More than half of the students were injured in the line of duty, and the impact of their injuries vary widely. Additionally, almost half of the student respondents did not indicate that education was a reason for joining the military. These unique characteristics will be expounded further in the discussion and are important considerations for developing targeted support structures for transitioning veterans.

R2: What are the perceptions of sources of support for student veterans on campus?

To examine sources of support during the transition to campus, student veterans were asked about their perceptions of support services identified in previous literature as most relevant to the student veteran population (Vacchi & Berger, 2014; Hamrick & Rumann, 2012). For instance, in assessing perceptions of campus support, students were asked about the Veteran Services office and Disability Services, rather than the Office of Student Life or Campus Recreation. These blocks of questions (see Appendix) focused on perceptions of faculty and staff, perceptions of support services

(on campus and off), and perceptions of the built campus environment. The survey used a four-point Likert scale with one being “not at all helpful” and four being “extremely helpful.”

When considering sources of support, Figure 2 (below) presents respondents’ mean scores for the list of services included in the survey. Campus veteran services and family/friend support were the highest rated resources (mean of 3.0), with civilian students and military transition services and courses (both on and off campus resources) scoring lower for students (closer to 2.0). When reviewing Figure 2 note that these scores are weighted, with students directed to respond only for sources of support that were relevant to them. For example, only 40 students responded with an opinion about helpfulness of service animals.

How helpful were the follow sources of support?

(0 = not helpful, 4 = very helpful)

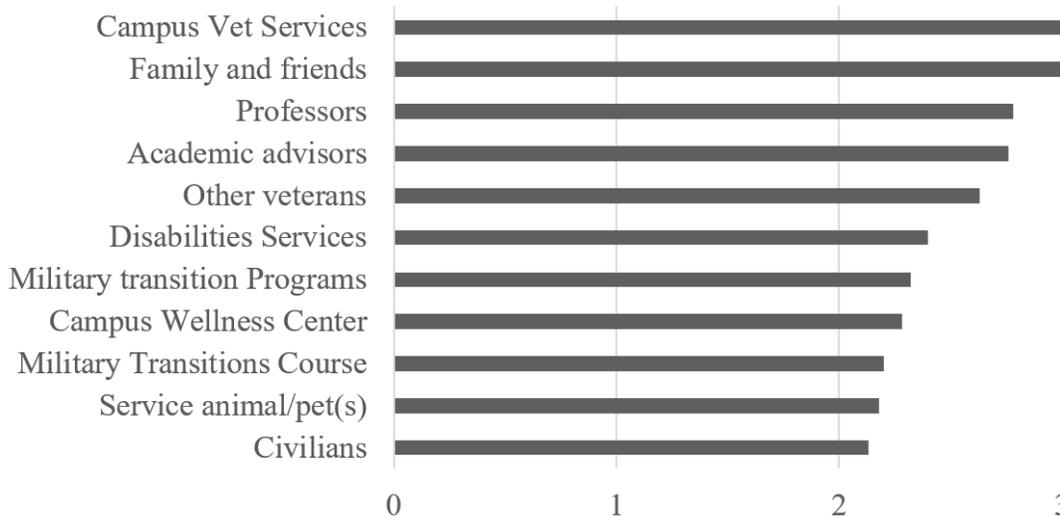


Figure 2. Source of support on campus

To investigate differences between male and female respondents we conducted a series of statistical tests. The first being an ordinary least squares regression, controlling for background characteristics such as branch of service, duty status, time in service, and age. Model results indicate no statistically significant differences among perceptions of campus support services by gender. Similar results were found when conducting t-test comparisons of group means of white and non-majority white students with regard to perceptions of campus supports.

On average students found the sources of support queried in this study to be somewhat helpful to helpful. Interestingly, students did not rate military-transition services ($M = 2.3$, $n = 181$), or the first-year transition seminar, both of which are designed specifically for veterans, ($M = 2.2$, $n = 57$) favorably.

Given that some veterans can face mobility issues as a result of SCIs, a block of survey questions inquired about perceptions of the built environment on campus. Figure 3 (next page) presents the results from this question block regarding mobility and physical access. Parking received the lowest score (1.9) and highest response rate, confirming what is commonly perceived as low satisfaction for access via parking at RI. Alternatively, access to elevators, electric doors, and ramp access was rated highest but had a lower response rate.

How would you rate the following?
(0 = not helpful, 4 = very helpful)

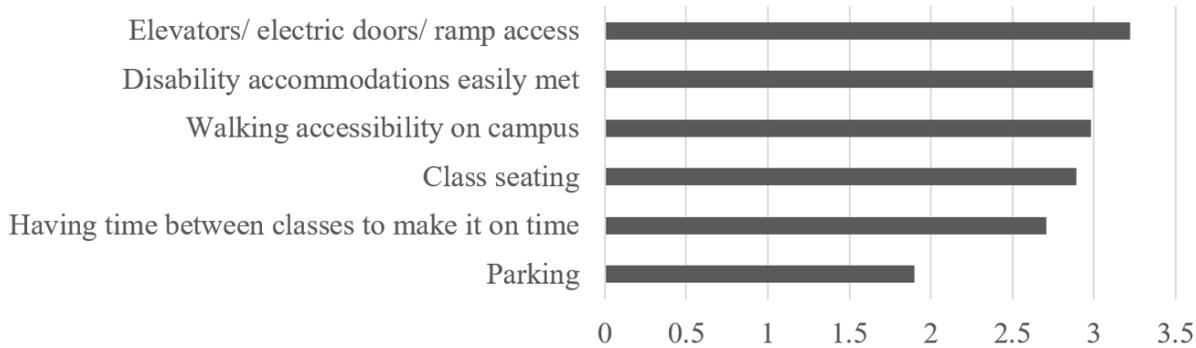


Figure 3. Perceptions of campus accessibility

R5: What are the challenges that student veterans are facing in the transition to higher education?

To better understand the challenges students have faced since enrolling, the open-ended question, “What has been the most difficult part of being a student?” was posed. Most of the respondents (n=239) provided a response. Themes from the responses further evidenced findings from research on Post-9/11 veterans (Naphan & Elliot, 2015; Flink 2017; Kato et al., 2016; Smith & True 2014). Table 5 includes themes which emerged from the analysis of responses. Themes that are both common and directly implicated in improved practice are presented below, along with examples of student responses.

Table 5. Thematic codes related to challenges in the transition

Emergent themes from open-ended responses	Count of responses
Interactions with young/civilian students	39
Living with service-connected injuries	30
Life balance	28
Lack of structure and transition	20
Academic advising and scheduling	20
Student support services	18
Academic rigor	15
Bureaucratic issues	15
Social isolation	14
Teaching issues	11
Parking	8
Cost	8
Faculty politics/liberal mindset	6

Theme 1. Interactions with young/civilian students

The most common response to the question about challenges faced related to civilian, mostly other student, interactions. Almost 40 responses focused on difficulties connecting with or understanding civilians on campus. The following responses demonstrate the frustration felt by veterans as well as the disconnect between veterans and their (often) younger classmates:

“Honestly dealing with little kids that think they know about the world when they have never left their hometown.”

“Being around children (18-20-year-olds).”

“Ensuring I don't overdo it when interacting with nonmilitary students and civilians in what I say, so as to not be abrasive.”

“Adjusting to civilian environment. Being around civilians that do not understand what a Veteran is not comfortable with. The immature nature of other students.”

“Being much older and in a different part of my life than other students. It was difficult to communicate and relate to them, which made coming to class lonely....”

Some veterans' frustration stemmed from perceiving a careless attitude, or sense of entitlement from younger civilian students.

“It's interesting to interact with younger students...many students are not invested in their education and they seem entitled which gets frustrating to see so frequently, especially since I wouldn't have been able to go to college (because of funding) if I hadn't joined the military and saved up a lot of money and done something to earn it.”

“Putting up with student who have a feeling of entitlement.”

Related to their frustration is a lack of commonality and divergent perspectives around stress and responsibility. This can make connecting with and relating to young, non-veterans difficult. Students described this as follows:

“As a nontraditional student in my 30's it's sometimes difficult to relate to the much younger student base. It can be hard to relate to some of their issues as I have been in much more high-risk military situations compared to how they feel about certain stressful situations.”

“Working in teams with kids—I've done better when I've had at least one other veteran or at least adult.”

A few respondents alluded to a lack of concern and understanding regarding SCI.

“Dealing with people who treat PTSD as a joke.”

In addition to challenges related to civilian students, several respondents experienced frustration with faculty members who were perceived as unappreciative of military service.

“Certain professors treating me like I’m just some kid, like just any other college student, like i’ve [sic] accomplished nothing in my life up to this point, like I’m not as good because I don’t have a degree.”

Theme 2. Living with injuries and disability accommodations

Student responses frequently related to difficulties experienced in relation to SCIs such as trauma or injury. Within this thematic category, students discussed challenges with accommodations, concentration, and access due to the physical and built environment of campus. The most recurrent response related to campus accessibility for walking around a hilly campus with distant parking spaces, for example:

“Navigating campus. There is a lot of ups and downs and walking for someone with back and knee issues.”

“The hills, stairs and hills. I have leg and back issues bad enough to hurt but not enough to handicap me so it's difficult going from building to building.”

Other students responded with “walking” or “stairs” as their complete response. This is an interesting finding since responses to the Likert scale questions about access to elevators, electric doors, and ramp access was highly rated (>3, “somewhat helpful”). Other students provided specific examples of dealing with a disability by describing limitations with the campus buildings and furniture. A few students specifically mentioned the small and uncomfortable desks.

“The elevators/access to stairs due to small door frames when there’s people passing through — people with disabilities end up having to wait until the line of people filing single file get through the door instead of the doors being wide enough for 2 people to pass through.”

“High school style desks are terrible and almost impossible for people with disabilities.”

“The desks we have around campus are not for college students. Especially, Disabled Veterans.”

Other respondents described difficulty navigating the university’s disability accommodations process—including for some, a desire to avoid that process, as it involves identifying as having a disability—Their responses elucidate the complex and opaque nature of how and when to seek disability accommodations for their SCI.

“...getting minor accommodations without having to go through disability services...”

“Working around disabilities that the professor can't accommodate.”

“Short-term memory.”

“Concentration while taking tests due to noise.”

“My Chem teacher blowing up an experiment 2 minutes before a midterm and not understanding why I was shaken up and didn't want to take it after that, forcing me to withdraw from the class at my expense.”

“Professor [XXX] gave me a test in his office once and started punching the dry erase board. There have been other teachers do other things but that was probably the worst.”

Some student veterans, particularly those with TBI and PTS, shared that their greatest challenge was with accommodations, which were either ignored (in the case of loud triggering noises, difficulty concentrating) or unavailable/unhelpful.

Theme 3. Life balance

Another common response (28) centered on balancing school with other life obligations. Some respondents wrote about difficulty managing their time and adjusting to a new life that requires prioritization, and balancing school with work and family. Balance and time management may be common struggles for adult students, but some aspects of the military lifestyle likely create unique circumstances for those who are transitioning out (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). The following responses illustrate how, particularly junior enlisted members while in the military, who likely have fewer in-service obligations, have to adjust to competing obligations for time after their transition:

“Time management. Being in the military it was easy to do what you wanted (as junior enlisted), because you only had work to worry about. Having multiple assignments and studying to do really tests your time management skills.”

“Evening classes starting at 4:45. Have to have a job, find a place to park, then hobble into class.”

“Getting a schedule that facilitates my life off campus. Some classes only have availability that conflicts with my childcare, and work.”

Another student mentioned the academic schedule as being difficult to manage:

“Classes seem to all peak at the end of the semester, instead of a smoother increase in difficulty.”

Finally, to provide examples of juggling family obligations, the following students wrote:

“Convincing my family the workload is worth the payoff!”

“Caring for my children, home, and active duty spouse while attending classes.”

Theme 4. Lack of structure and transition

Another established issue facing transitioning service members is adjustment from a structured and directed environment (military) to an unstructured, non-linear lifestyle like college (Jones, 2013; Kato et al., 2016; Smith & True, 2014). Similarly, this theme emerged in this study as 20 respondents indicated some form of adjustment or transition issue. In fact, seven students wrote a variation of the short response, “Transition from military to civilian (or student),” indicating a general sense of struggle with leaving the military and starting school. The following examples illustrate this theme further:

“Going from a structured environment with the same mindset. To an environment with a bunch of young college students who didn't have the same structured mindset.”

“Learning to structure time in a way that is self-regimented. “

Theme 5. Academic advising and scheduling

Another emergent theme was academic advising and course scheduling, with 20 students listing this as a major concern. Expectation setting around the transfer of military-related college credits also seemed to contribute to a sense of anxiety around advancing towards degree completion. The following responses provide examples of the frustration that can be associated with course and scheduling challenges:

“Advisers and Staff are not over [sic] clear when talking to new students above the age of 20. I have been frequently misled and disappointed.”

“Being a transfer student, I have credits all over the place, it has been somewhat difficult to find classes that are what I need because of scheduling conflicts or other reasons.”

“Most classes that I need, only one choice is offered and it is usually at the exact same time as another class that I need that is only offered once per semester. It is making it difficult to graduate on time.”

“Getting classes at the times I need. Most classes are morning to midday and I have to work full time.”

“Trusting academic advisors that the classes I took would go towards my degree.”

“Credit for military service was lacking majorly.”

If colleges and universities hope to ease the transition process, acknowledging concerns such as these is prescient.

Theme 6. Social isolation

Social isolation is often associated with transitioning from the military to civilian life (Blackwell-Starnes, 2018; Elliot et al., 2011; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). The following responses to the question about the most difficult part of being a student at RI demonstrate isolation and not fitting in:

“Being a veteran and kind of feeling lost, no one understanding. I am alone here w[ith] no family or friends.”

“...Isolation from all the traditional students...”

“...Making REAL friends.”

“...I feel lost in the crowd...”

Related to feeling out of place, some students indicated a need to hide their veteran status, because of guilt, shame, or another reason. Following are two responses related to this,

“Being older than everyone, and also having to hide my veteran status for numerous reasons...”

“...Feeling out of place, guilty for service, hiding veteran status...”

Taken together, these statements illustrate the extent to which a veteran may be affected by perceived stigma and/or isolation in the military to college transition process.

Theme 7. Politics and identity

Finally, a few responses alluded to a sense of mistrust and misalignment about political ideology on campus, a theme identified by Elliot et al. (2011). Four students mentioned a “liberal” or “left” ideology, while two students indicated a lack of diversity and inclusion. These political concerns may be linked to the current political climate, but also indicate that students across the political spectrum feel compelled to list this as a primary source of difficulty. Examples from this theme are presented below:

“...Listening to left-wing propaganda and failing to understand military sacrifices...”

“...Lack of cultural diversity...”

Most of the emergent themes from the list of responses have been identified in previous research on student veterans (Naphan & Elliot 2015; Flink 2017; Kato et al., 2016; Smith & True 2014). Important here is the extent to which student veterans feel disconnected from civilians *in a military community and on a campus with multiple efforts existing to support student veteran transitions*. An implication for RI and other universities is that additional approaches to helping civilian students understand and communicate effectively with veterans may be warranted (Hodges, 2018).

R4. How can college/university faculty help student veterans in their transition to campus?

Primary to any student transition to higher education is establishment of personal connections and support from campus advisors. Through qualitative inquiry, Vacchi & Berger (2014) find student veterans identify personal advising and social/emotional support, i.e., person-to-person, as the most important success predictor. When we asked about aspects of support from professors and faculty, students indicated lower levels of perceived mentorship (2.7 or n = 328); however, respondents indicated higher levels of feeling a sense of welcome and accessible/responsive for office hours (mean of 3.1 for both or n = 328).

How helpful would you rate your professors on the following:

(0 = Not at all, 4 = Very Helpful)

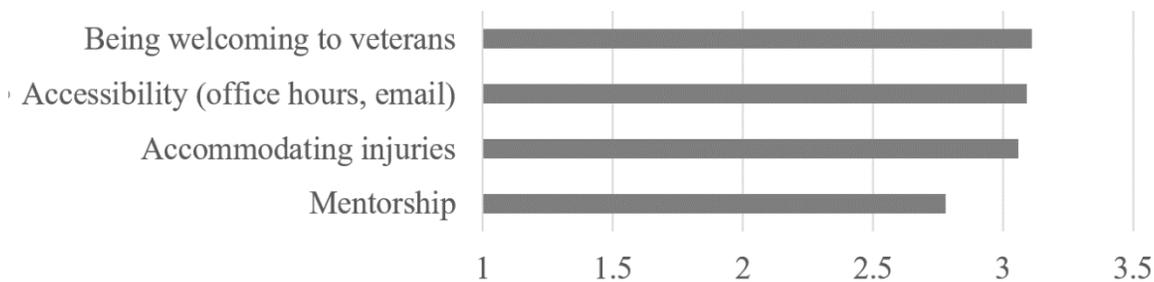


Figure 4: Perceptions of faculty/professors

To examine differences between male and female perceptions of faculty, we again conducted *t*-test comparisons of group means. For the sources of support stemming from faculty, there were no statistically significant mean differences with men and women rating faculty as mostly helpful (all means near 3.0).

Finally, students were asked, “Can you think of something a professor has done that was particularly helpful in your transition from the military to campus?” From the 182 written responses, 76 answered “no” or in a similar non-affirmative fashion. More than 40% indicated that no faculty actions stood out to them as particularly helpful. From the remaining answers, themes include (in order of frequency/percentage of response): faculty who understand veterans (15%), are generally

approachable and helpful—including being responsive, available, listening well, and being positive (15%), accommodating for military service, (8%) encouraging/offering advice/help finding resources (6%), accommodating for disabilities (5%), being welcoming to veterans (4%), providing mentorship or connecting student veterans to mentors in their career field (2%), and accommodating for child-care issues (2%). Additionally, responses included specific names of instructors/professors who were particularly helpful (5%).

Discussion

To further interpret and apply findings from our analysis, we return to the coping with transition framework presented by Anderson et al. (2011). The Four S model provides a practical framework for organizing and presenting findings from this study, and for considering specific tools for helping student veterans in transition.

Situation

The situation coping factors impacting transition are: triggers, timing, control, changes in role, duration, and assessment of the situation (Anderson et al., 2011). Regarding the “trigger” that causes the student veteran transition, it can be important to consider why the student decided to enroll. Students separated from the military and enrolled at RI for a variety of reasons; however, 40% of the students indicated that their separation may not have been planned. For those folks who separated under medical, administrative, or “other” circumstances (or chose “prefer not to say”), the trigger for transitioning to higher education may have been unanticipated and/or unwelcomed, making it more difficult to cope with the transition. Understanding why student veterans are enrolling and considering a range of programs to help those who are less prepared (i.e., undecided majors, first generation college students), may help them cope with the transition.

Pertaining to the timing of the transition, demographic data for the RI student veteran population indicates that most students are older, and results from the thematic analysis related to research question three highlight that this age difference is one of the more common challenges faced by student veterans. The timing of returning to college may also manifest in a sense of urgency associated with their life clock and contribute to frustrations with scheduling courses, maintaining progress towards degree completion, and frustrations with civilian classmates who are not as serious. A high proportion of students described their struggles getting the courses they needed due to their work and family obligations. Streamlining student processes, such as providing priority enrollment, flexible class offerings, and allowing students to bring children to class are possible strategies to help student veterans with anxiety around advancing towards a stable civilian career. Additionally, listening to student veteran concerns is a simple, but important, strategy for helping them through anxiety around “timing”.

The control factor described by Anderson et al. (2011), relates to the trigger/reason for separating from the military; however, it goes further by categorizing internal and external sources of control as they relate to the transition. Some student veterans may feel that access to VA education benefits, and the associated financial housing benefit, is the only option if their employment prospects are low (Zoli et.al, 2015). Given that 50% of the student respondents listed higher education funding as the primary reason for joining the service, there may be many students who were not aspiring to seek higher education but feel they have no other choice. For students who never intended on transitioning out of the military, mentorship and career advice from faculty may be even more important than for student veterans with more advanced career plans.

When prompted to share their most pressing concern, several students indicated a feeling of being behind academically, being older, and having a variety of disparate credits, all of which may exacerbate the sense of anxiety around taking the correct courses in order to graduate. Additionally,

strict requirements around course-taking for VA education benefits eligibility, may leave students feeling they have little room for error in scheduled courses (Williams-Klotz & Gansemer-Topf, 2017). Providing individualized academic and career resources to help them see where they are going and build confidence and sense of control for their future is one strategy for increasing the sense of control felt by student veterans. Other examples might include providing targeted and mandatory advising, and as evidenced in responses to research question four, improving mentoring from faculty.

Regarding role changes, as related to *Situation* coping factors, student veterans may have a difficult time understanding their new role of student, and changing roles around family obligations. For student veterans who may have recently separated, it is important to provide clear guidance of what is expected as a student, and how they fit into the university hierarchy. Role models are also an important component that can help student veterans understand how to assimilate; therefore, peer advising/mentor programs and student/faculty mentor programs are important support mechanisms (Williams-Klotz & Gansemer-Topf, 2017).

All the *Situation* factors described above may have an impact on how student veterans assess their transition. For example, a student who originally joined the service with a primary motivation to earn financial educational benefits may assess their transition as very positive. This may not be the case for many veterans, so helping them to consider strategies for successfully coping with the transition may increase their chances at success in college. Within the mentoring context, and to aid student veterans as they consider their transition and future, the following questions could be posed, with associated action plans and resources depending on student responses (Anderson et al., 2011, p. 67).

“*Situation*” questions to shape the creation/guided selection of services:

1. Why did you decided to enroll in higher education? (trigger)
2. Was enrolling in higher education your first choice, or was this the best choice at the time? (trigger and control)
3. How long have you been out of the military, and how do you feel that earning a degree will advance you towards your goals? (timing)
4. Do you see this transition to college as positive, negative, or neutral? (assessment) and Why?

Self

Self factors relate to personal attributes such as demographic, cultural, and psychological characteristics that may impact self-efficacy, and lead one to feel optimistic about the transition. Anderson et al. (2011) relate these factors to meaning-making and how much control, resilience, and response to ambiguity one may have during the transition. Although issues of class, socio-economic status, and power are pervasive and impactful for any life transition, our discussion focuses specifically on military veteran issues present in the literature as related to this study’s findings. Despite the evidence in the literature that women are less likely to identify as a veteran, and seek services offered for veterans from the VA or other providers (Washington et al. 2011; Mittal et al., 2013), gender did not emerge as a dominant theme in the open-ended student responses. Men and women responded similarly regarding sources of support on campus.

Regarding health and wellness more broadly, student responses in this study indicated high levels of SCIs and reported a deteriorating quality of life as a result. The volume of responses (and high rates) related to SCI at RI suggests additional consideration for accommodations and accessibility on campus is needed. For example, institutions with high numbers of veterans may consider allocating resources (or acquiring resources through fund-raising) for accessible furniture, building modifications, or access services. The office of disability services is rated highly at RI, but creating more opportunities for student veterans to register with disability services may be another

strategy for reducing the barriers for student veterans and improving agency and resilience. Our findings further suggest that while stigma associated with disability may be decreasing somewhat (Currier, McDermott, & McCormick, 2017), many veterans with SCIs do not identify as disabled and do not see clear benefit from using the disability services process (i.e., of a formal accommodation letter). Faculty might consider informal accommodation and broad awareness (e.g. avoiding loud noises) or adoption of universal design for learning strategies which mitigate the need for individual accommodation.

Furthermore, at an institution with a high number of services nested in a veteran-friendly community, this context could support a student selected customization of services. For example, if the veteran has a good treatment plan and high confidence in the VA, they may fare better in their transition. Alternatively, if the student is hampered by an injury and does not feel the VA or other medical services are sufficiently addressing their concerns, they may feel less optimism towards a successful transition and may benefit from disability services during their college experience. Support of student veterans with disabilities can accommodate their studies, but also serve as a mechanism for building self-efficacy and resilience. Again, adaption of questions developed by Anderson et al. (2011, p. 73), can guide faculty and staff in supporting student veterans.

“Self” questions to shape the creation/guided selection of services:

1. How much ambiguity are you feeling as you transition, and do you have other veterans or staff/faculty who can answer questions and provide clarity?
2. Do you have an effective treatment plan for your injuries, that you feel confident in, and is working?
3. Do you feel in control of your transition? Do you know about all the services on campus that can help you gain a sense of control (advising, career services, veteran services)?
4. Is there a void in sense of meaning and purpose, since leaving the military? Are you aware of the clubs/organizations on campus and in the community that can help you feel a sense of purpose?
5. Are you comfortable asking for help, and do you know where and how to do so?

Social and emotional supports

Anderson et al. (2011) describe sources of social and emotional support as concentric circles moving from intimate relationships to institutional or community support. A more prominent finding here was that even in a military-supportive community, students felt a strong disconnect to, and frustration with, civilian students. Open-access resources for faculty and staff trainings are increasing available (PsychArmor Institute, 2019), but additional consideration should be given to civilian students’ awareness and sensitivity training. To further support student veterans struggling to connect with civilian students, transition seminar courses and/or bridge programs should address socialization skill building and coping mechanisms for re-integrating veterans into civilian classrooms. Dialoging with students and sharing experiences and common frustrations as a group can create opportunities for students to develop resilience and agency for success. While most of the existing supports at RI are either faculty- or veteran-facing, another avenue would be to encourage more robust inclusion within the cross-discipline curriculum of scholarship related to military/veteran experience (Hodges, 2018; Smith, 2018). This would have the dual benefit of allowing veterans to see themselves in the curriculum and to increase civilian students’ knowledge and understanding of military service given the civilian/military gap. (Smith, 2018).

For veterans at RI (Figure 2, page 8), the military transition course was also one of the lowest rated categories in terms of helpfulness of sources of support. This course (or another section with traditional first years) is required for students who are transferring fewer than thirty credit hours.

Existing research on first-year courses for veterans indicates broad empirical support and favorable responses, but some students may feel this type of course is an unnecessary requirement (Mendez et al., 2018). Campuses offering transition courses may consider ways to individualize the curriculum for the unique needs of student veterans, particularly those students who may feel it unnecessary. Using the suggested questions provided in this discussion section can serve as guide for meeting students where they are in their transition and further develop a checklist of targeted services based on individual needs.

Additionally, service animals were rated lower as a source of support. It is unknown how many of the 40 respondents to this question utilize service animals, but one would expect service animals to be rated highly as a source of support. Staff at RI may consider integrating additional programming to educate veterans on service and comfort animal policies. Further inquiry into how service animals are helping student veterans on campus represents a future area for research.

Student respondents rated family and friend support highly, with lower scores related to support and mentorship from faculty. Results indicate a low occurrence of mentorship and highlight a need for additional focus on creating on-campus mentorship opportunities. Current mentorship programming focuses on peer-to-peer mentoring; however, response data suggests a gap in the mentoring strategy regarding the building of relationships with faculty. On one hand, many students reported positive interactions with faculty, characterized by a sense of welcome, responsiveness, availability, and willingness to accommodate disabilities. On the other hand, many students appeared to have little individual or personal contact with faculty. It is possible that the latter group might be well served by encouragement and training in seeking out faculty mentorship as part of building social support networks. Another approach would be to help student veterans, who may not understand the roles and responsibilities of faculty members, build self-advocacy skills and strategies for seeking mentorship. Assisting veterans in this area may prove to be beneficial beyond the transition process, as civilian life necessitates self-sufficiency in ways not emphasized within the military (Smith & True, 2014). Thus, programming that not only encourages faculty to take on mentorship roles, but also makes evident to both faculty and students what good faculty support and mentoring consists of, could enhance the outer circles of support for student veterans. Developing strategies for veterans to seek out mentorship may result in higher perceptions of faculty support in this area. Utilizing the following questions, staff and faculty can help veterans build an effective social support network (Anderson et al., 2011, p. 83).

“Social” questions to shape the creation/guided selection of services:

- Is your current support system working?
- Is the veteran getting what he/she needs in terms of support via affirmation, counsel, positivity?
- Is there a range of social and emotional supports for the individual throughout the transition?
- Was your support system disrupted by the transition? What are some ways that you (the veteran) can establish new relationships with people on and off campus to support your progress?

Strategies

Throughout the literature, strategies are offered for coping with aspects of the transition from the military to college (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; DiRamio et al., 2008; Cook & Kim, 2009; Elliot et al., 2011; Hamrick & Rumann, 2012; Mendez et al., 2018); however, particular attention should be paid to the strategies introduced by Anderson et al. (2011), particularly in the area of inhibition of action. Inhibition of action refers to how an individual channels emotional response to situations they cannot

change. For student veterans, examples might include working with non-veteran students in groups (Blackwell-Starnes, 2018), having trouble with a VA counselor, seeking out faculty mentoring, or balancing school-life situations (see themes in findings section). Student responses in this study suggest that RI and other campuses with high veteran enrollment should consider offering programming designed to help student veterans explore other identities. This approach can create a space for students to begin identifying commonalities, place value on difference, and overcome life challenges together within a strong support system. Additionally, campuses should consider refining services to meet individual needs, like creating a customizable service plan to address the diversity of student veterans and their needs.

Limitations and Future Research

Not all institutes will be analogous to RI limiting the generalizability of findings from this study. For institutions with high veteran enrollments regardless of proportionality, findings from this study may be particularly useful, and may offer insight for those changing environments. A multi-institutional study could provide broader representation of perspectives from student veterans and patterns may exist that were not uncovered here. Additionally, data used in this study are cross-sectional, rather than longitudinal, and thus tracking the success of the study participants over time is not possible. Finally, as with all surveys there may be a systematic difference between those who responded and those who did not (Dillman et al., 2009).

When considering future research, the context and community setting within which these campuses exist is particularly important. Given the cultural influence of the military on the community in which RI exists, there is justification for investigating how student veteran transition is influenced by efforts of the campus but also by community influences. Additional research might also investigate further the Self characteristics of the Four S model. For example, research on the intersectional role of race and veteran status might provide targeted findings and results that could be actionable campus programming (Vaccaro, 2015). Furthermore, studies that pry into the impacts of disability on transition may help campuses think more critically about how to support veterans with SCI and/or psychological issues.

Conclusion

This research expands upon the literature on student veteran transition from the military to college (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Livingston et al., 2011; Lim et al., 2017), by examining not only how military connected students perceive their transition experience, but also how they view and utilize support structures specifically designed for them. It is also important for campuses to consider the efficacy of separate components of support services and assess how these services meet individual needs. For example, creating a customizable service plan to address the diversity of student veterans' needs may be effective for those students who continue to feel isolated and struggle academically. Although a host of services may exist, students who fail to utilize these services may be at high risk for dropping out. This paper employs the Anderson et al. (2011) framework for advising someone through transition, and can help create a foundation for individualized plans, discussion prompts, and suggested action plans.

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Appendix A. Perceptions of Transition and Disability Survey Instrument

Student Veteran Experiences with Transition and Disability*

1. How many years were you in the military?
2. Was the majority of your service pre-9/11 or post-9/11?
3. Which best describes your highest rank attained?
4. Were education benefits one of the main reasons you joined the military?
5. What were the circumstances of your separation from the military?
6. Please rate the following sources of support during your transition (1-5):
 - a. family and friend support
 - b. veteran classmates
 - c. civilian classmates
 - d. military transitional services (for example, TAPS program, Soldier for Life, ACAP)
 - e. university faculty (professors)
 - f. campus veteran services
 - g. campus wellness center
 - h. disabilities services
 - i. Transitions class / first year seminar
 - j. academic advisors
 - k. service animal/pet(s)
7. Please rate your professors/faculty support during your transition (1-5):
 - a. being welcoming to veterans
 - b. mentorship
 - c. accessible (office hours, email replies, etc.)
 - d. being understanding/accommodating

8. Please rate the following in terms of campus accessibility (1-5):
 - a. disability accommodations easily met
 - b. elevators/electric doors/ramp access
 - c. parking
 - d. having enough time between classes to make it to class on time
 - e. walking accessibility on campus
 - f. class seating
 9. Do you feel out of place in the civilian world?
 10. Did you have any of the following?
 - a. service-connected injury
 - b. physical impairment
 - c. TBI
 - d. sensory Injury
 - e. PTS
 - f. other psychological injuries/ailments (e.g. anxiety, depression, survivor's guilt)?
 - g. prefer not to disclose injuries
 11. Do you think other people can easily notice your injury?
 12. Do you feel like you stick out on campus because of your injury?
 13. Do you have a VA disability rating?
 14. If so, what is your current VA disability rating?
 15. Are you satisfied with your current disability rating?
 16. Do you refer to yourself as disabled?
 17. On a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 being 'not at all' and 4 being 'very much,' to what extent has your injury affected your quality of life?
 18. Has the impact of your injury on your quality of life changed over time?
- *For publication length parameters, only a subset of questions is included.