



# Empowering Female [Student] Veterans through Community Writing and Experiential Learning in the Classroom

SPECIAL COLLECTION:  
WOMEN OF THE IRAQ  
WAR

**RESEARCH**

MEGHAN BUCKLEY 

**VIRGINIA TECH.**  
PUBLISHING

## ABSTRACT

This article argues for the importance of community writing groups on college campuses targeted towards female veterans to aid in female student veterans' successful transition to the university. Female veterans, in general, often face a host of additional challenges upon homecoming compared to their male counterparts including, but not limited to, higher incidents of depression, repression of memories of military sexual trauma (MST), and struggles to reacclimate to caretaker roles as wives and/or mothers. While Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs) can play an important role in rebuilding eroded support levels and creating a social bridge for transitioning veterans, studies indicate that many current organizations do not reach women veterans with ideal effect. This article argues that the presence of veteran community writing groups on college campuses that are directed toward females may encourage female student veterans to disclose and self-identify their veteran status. Further, given data that indicates returning female veterans are likelier to have negative personal and family reintegration experiences, female veteran focused community writing groups can provide a much-desired sense of comradery, increase social connectivity and positive relation to the university, and serve as an outlet for secure emotional expression.

## CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

**Meghan Buckley**

Stony Brook University, US

[m.bridget.buckley@gmail.com](mailto:m.bridget.buckley@gmail.com)

---

## KEYWORDS:

veteran pedagogy;  
bibliotherapy;  
community writing; experiential  
learning; applied learning

## TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Buckley, M. (2021). Empowering Female [Student] Veterans through Community Writing and Experiential Learning in the Classroom. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 7(2), pp. 44–59. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v7i2.268>

In a January 2019 op-ed for *The Wall Street Journal* titled “Women Don’t Belong in Combat,” Heather Mac Donald bluntly begins: “The Obama-era policy of integrating women into ground combat units is a misguided social experiment that threatens military readiness and wastes resources in the service of a political agenda. The next Defense Secretary should end it” (para. 1). Mac Donald, a political commentator and author of *The Diversity Delusion: How Race and Gender Pandering Corrupt the University and Undermine Our Culture* (2018) refers in her essay to President Obama’s 2015 order that the US military open all occupational positions to both genders, regardless of combat designation. This policy ended decades of the military’s ground combat exclusion policy by promising that “Women who can meet the high standards required [by those positions] will have new opportunities to serve” (White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2015, para. 2). Many of the nearly 1,300 comments on the opinion piece voice their support, arguing that it is biologically impractical for women to serve in combat positions and that allowing them to do so would lower our nation’s military standards. However, parsing the comments closely reveals female veterans quietly, but resolutely, voicing their dissent with ideas about their “subpar” endurance and ability, explaining the extreme physical strength required for their assignments and chastising Mac Donald for her uninformed judgment and lack of military experience.

Comments like those described above emphasize that although women can serve in equally physically taxing roles as their male military counterparts, their contributions are often critiqued and minimized rather than celebrated or validated. Aside from public misunderstanding about the role and import of their service, female veterans are often displaced both within their deployed units, where gendered issues of social cohesion disrupt the formation of strong emotional bonds and sense of comradery, as well as within the paradigms of veteran service organizations (VSOs) that are historically male-oriented. These feelings of unbelonging can stay with female veterans long after their service is completed; they face a host of additional challenges upon homecoming compared to their male counterparts including, but not limited to, higher incidents of depression, repression of memories of military sexual trauma (MST), and struggles to reacclimate to caretaker roles as wives and/or mothers.

In this article, I argue for the importance of community writing groups on college campuses targeted towards female student veterans to aid their successful transition to the university. Nearly 20% of female veterans utilize their GI Bill benefits to complete college degrees after they serve, and these veterans often have greater difficulty acclimating to their new identities as students within the

larger campus community (Heineman, 2017). While VSOs can play an important role in rebuilding eroded support levels and creating a social bridge for transitioning veterans, studies indicate that many current organizations do not reach women veterans with ideal effect (Hodges 2018; Thomas et al., 2017). This article argues that the presence of veteran community writing groups on college campuses that are directed toward females may encourage female student veterans to disclose and self-identify their veteran status. Further, given data that indicates returning female veterans are likelier to have negative personal and family reintegration experiences (Maiocco & Smith, 2016), female veteran focused community writing groups can provide a much-desired sense of comradery, increase social connectivity and positive relation to the university, and serve as an outlet for secure emotional expression.

Specifically, I analyze the impact of a pilot community writing initiative from fall 2019 at a midsize R1 university where civilian students in my upper division “Literature of War” course embarked on an experiential learning process to write about their relationship to war and the military alongside female veterans, in partnership with the Herstory Writers Workshop of Long Island. The initiative, titled “Combat Silence” and funded in part by a public humanities grant, asked the following questions:

1. What silences would we be able to break if we brought together women veterans of different ages and branches who joined the military for a host of different reasons?
2. What contributions would the student writers make, and how would their presence dare the veteran writers to go deeper into their own stories to find the words that they most wanted the world to hear?

The memoir essays produced by my civilian students and the female veterans were the result of open dialogue and feedback between the two groups and proved mutually beneficial. Students in the course not only wrote alongside female veterans, but also read a sampling of published memoirs by servicewomen; doing so encouraged them to realize the relative dearth of female authored/focused war literature while also recognizing the need to view servicewomen as active combatants and participants instead of spectators or victims. The female veteran participants benefitted from the low-stakes opportunity for community reintegration the workshop provided and the opportunities for advice and cross-dialogue from the student civilian audience. Further, the value of the workshop as it relates to female [student] veteran pedagogies will be analyzed along the following four subpoints:

1. the workshop as an opportunity for the veteran participants to embrace their femininity as part of, and not separate from, their military identity
2. the veteran/civilian dynamic of the workshop as representative of an asset-based pedagogical model
3. the benefits of allowing the female [student] veteran participants to write about their experience for an authentic audience
4. the workshop as embodying specific resources and elements that student veterans have expressed as wanting their university to offer.

This article discusses the logistics of the workshop, its strengths and challenges, and suggestions for implementing this initiative in the future.

## THE UNIQUE NEEDS OF FEMALE [STUDENT] VETERANS

The inspiration behind the Herstory writing workshop stemmed from the realization that, though much research focuses on how trauma and war impacts veterans who choose artistic methods like poetry and memoir to share their stories, many of the memoirs and testimonials widely available are written by male veterans and skew towards a white, male experience of combat and war. Simply put, female voices are often excluded from the “war canon” in various types of media and narrative—from movies and television to war novels, poems, and memoirs—even though the Veterans Alliance (VA) reports that women comprise roughly 15–20% of US Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines enlistees (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2017, p.1). Though the public’s image of the veteran tends to be white, male, and combat experienced, such a perception misses the large number of veterans who are women, non-white, and who have never deployed (Hodges, 2018).

There are three major turning points for American servicewomen and their relationship to the military:

1. after Vietnam, there was a considerable increase in the number of women enlisted during peacetime
2. the conflict in the Persian Gulf War was the first time a limited number of women got to see active combat
3. the Iraq War and its unconventional wartime tactics (drones, cyberwarfare, etc.) so blurred the lines of what constituted “combat” that in 2015 the Obama administration ordered the military to open all occupations to women, regardless of combat designation (Eager, 2014; Wright, 2018).

During the Iraq War, American women made history insofar as they participated in combat on an unprecedented scale, and the Iraq War is groundbreaking in both historical and literary terms: first, women not only served but also fought openly as women for the first time in a full-scale war waged by the United States; second, authors have begun to feature openly female combatants as the centerpieces of war narratives (Wright, 2018). The community writing project described below, then, aimed to illuminate and explicate the double bind that females face as both women and servicemembers within a hyper-masculine US military culture that often casts this dual positionality as an inflexible binary, and to reflect on the ways that the Iraq War helped produce a new class of female servicewomen who were largely active combatants and participants instead of spectators or victims.

Despite this steadily burgeoning class of female warriors, military resources have failed to keep pace with the physical and mental health needs of its female demographic. A 2010 survey conducted to determine the social needs of Post-9/11 combat veterans returning to the community found that nearly 50% of veterans reported difficulty with reestablishing civilian friendships, maintaining friendships from the military, and making new friends, while another 30–45% reported difficulty getting along with their spouses/partners, children, and/or other family members (Sayer et al., 2015). Further, 56% reported difficulty confiding or sharing personal thoughts or feelings with others, and another 49% reported difficulty feeling that they “belong” in civilian life (Sayer et al., 2015). Women veterans, however, feel these emotions most acutely, and their struggle to emotionally grapple with memories of their service is compounded by their feelings of exclusion from veterans groups because of their gender, as well as their reluctance to utilize resources from VSOs such as the American Legion, the VA, Disabled American Veterans, and Veterans of Foreign Wars. As summarily reported by a survey conducted in 2017 on female veterans and their utilization of VSOs: “Participation rates are low, and qualitative analyses indicate[s] that women veterans do not report impressions of a welcoming environment” (Thomas et al., 2017, p. 9). Female veterans have come to view organizations like the VA as historically male-oriented and symbolic of a cohort of mostly male veterans, are skeptical of whether they can utilize the VA to access female oriented or gender specific services (i.e., those related to reproductive health), and worry that appointments may be time-consuming and interfere with their caretaking/head of household responsibilities. Despite the VA’s publication in 2010 of the *Uniform Mental Health Services in VA Medical Centers and Clinics Handbook* to expressly include their rights to participate in gender separate therapy groups,

many female veterans “do not know about their right to request female-specific services, nor the financial compensation available to cover healthcare costs” (Strong, 2018, p. 93).

Furthermore, although female veterans tend to suffer from PTSD at higher rates than their male counterparts due to experiences with military sexual assault/trauma (MSA/MST), they are much less likely to be *diagnosed* with PTSD or to receive disability compensation or VA support for these issues. MSA/MST includes attempted or completed incidents of sexual harassment, assault, and rape while the victim was serving in the military, and such incidents affect servicewomen at disproportionately high percentages. Studies on women with sexual trauma (including sexual harassment) incurred in recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan found rates of sexual trauma as high as 41% for women and as low as 4% for men (Katz et al., 2017). Other reports indicate that “About 25% of women have a positive MST screening for sexual assault during their time in the military compared to 1% of men” (Gilmore et al., 2016, p. 547), which in turn exponentially increases their likelihood of developing PTSD. As of July 2009, 5,103 female Iraq or Afghanistan veterans had received disability benefits for PTSD as compared to over 57,000 males, and, on average, 32% of PTSD claims based on sexual trauma are accepted by the VA versus nearly double that (53%) of claims based on combat trauma (Eager, 2014, pp. 81–83). This low rate of financial support and formal validation from the VA can result in female veterans’ extrapolation that their MSA/MST is to be normalized as an occupational hazard that is part of deployment dynamics and/or general military culture: a military culture that already casts their femininity as a deficit characteristic and a source of degradation. As Strong et al. (2018) argues in their study on how servicewomen navigate their dual roles as women and veterans:

Because the public often assumes that females serve in non-combat related or less-risky military roles, their injuries, mental suffering, and struggles with community reintegration are often overlooked. Instead, female veterans tend to internalize these attitudes and problematically conclude that their needs are not important or severe enough to justify services. (p. 93)

Such perceptions, coupled with the lack of VSO access and support, contribute to servicewomen’s feelings of unbelonging and invisibility both during and after their service.

With veterans returning to college to use their military education credits in larger numbers than ever before, the

college campus serves as a microcosm for contemporary veteran issues and emphasizes their potential difficulties transitioning to civilian spaces.<sup>1</sup> Certain aspects make the transition to higher education difficult for *all* student veterans, regardless of gender. First, the lack of understanding between what civilians know and understand about what servicepeople experience is known as the military-civilian gap (Smith, 2018). This gap is exacerbated by the relatively small percentage of the general population who serve in the military—roughly 6%—as well as the fact that the percentage of the population that has served has steadily decreased amongst the demographics of younger generations compared to older generations during the latter half of the 20th century: for example, 79% of 50–64-year-olds have an immediate family member who served compared to 33% of 18–29-year-olds (Hodges, 2018). Second, student veterans tend to be nontraditional students who are older than their civilian counterparts and less likely to have commonalities with them in terms of home life and general responsibilities; in 2016, student veterans enrolled at two and four-year colleges using the Post-9/11 GI Bill ranged from 24–40-years-old, with an average age of 25 (Drebing et al., 2018; Postsecondary National Policy Institute [PNPI], 2019). Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the above factors often result in student veterans tending to isolate themselves from campus life, including events and extracurricular activities, to expediate their degree progress and time to completion (Stockdale et al., 2019). This unwillingness to volunteer or get involved, in turn, often extends to many student veterans failing to disclose their veteran status to anyone within their micro-classroom or macro-campus communities. All of these factors combined, in addition to more nuanced issues such as working full-time while in school or familial responsibilities at home, results in roughly a quarter of student veterans failing to complete their undergraduate degree (Blackwell-Starnes, 2018).

Though female veterans are pursuing college degrees in higher numbers than ever before, they remain a relatively invisible subset of the student veteran populace. Roughly 19% of all female veterans use their GI Bill benefits to fund all or part of their college education at the undergraduate or community college level, but their experiences and needs differ from those of their male colleagues (Heineman, 2017). In general, student veterans tend to be more focused and independent than traditional undergraduate students. However, female student vets tend to internalize their gendered military experience to become even more self-focused and isolated than male student vets. Studies on women veterans transitioning to college have offered suggestions for easing this adjustment, including sensitivity training for faculty and staff who will be working with female

veterans but might be unaware of specific issues they face (i.e., sexual/gender harassment, PTSD from being separated from a child during deployment, chronic pain associated with musculoskeletal injuries that disproportionately afflict women veterans due to ill-fitting military gear designed for larger male anatomy etc.), providing options for childcare for female student veterans, and creating academic resources like intersession academic “bootcamps” to help them reintegrate to basic math and writing skills (Haskell et al., 2011; Heineman, 2017). It is undeniable that male veterans disproportionately comprise the nation’s student veteran population, but an unfortunate side effect of this imbalance is that universities’ veteran-specific supports and programs are unintentionally geared towards the male student veteran academic reintegration experience (Stockdale et al., 2019). Women veterans in general tend to self-exclude from VSOs and veteran programs due to feeling a lack of comradery and support from organizations that are majorly comprised of, run by, and geared towards servicemen (Haskell et al., 2011; Mattocks et al., 2012; Strong, 2018; Thomas et al., 2017). These feelings of exclusion and invisibility are not lessened on the micro-space of the college campus, where female student veterans must juggle the transition from serviceperson to [nontraditional] student, while the experience of being in the gendered minority within their branch and unit is replicated on campus and in the classroom. As a result, female student veterans tend to feel isolated from both their female civilian classmates and male veteran students due to the common unstated assumption by faculty, staff, and peers that a female student asking about veteran services on campus is a military spouse, sibling, or daughter rather than a veteran herself.

## **COMMUNITY WRITING GROUPS, STORY THEORY, AND THE HERSTORY WORKSHOP**

One strategy to help increase the visibility of female student veterans on campus and promote a more positive community reintegration experience for them is through the implementation of experiential learning projects and community writing initiatives. Specifically, integrating such initiatives into course syllabi and within the classroom can help female student veterans feel their unique needs are being acknowledged and addressed, while allowing faculty to expand their pedagogical practices to be more sensitive and inclusive toward the gendered diversity of military personnel. Scholarship on successful reintegration strategies for female veterans has suggested that deliberate, consistent contact with fellow female veterans

through activities such as all-female veteran mentoring groups, support for younger female veterans by older female veterans, and the organization of community and peer groups for veterans by gender can exponentially increase their sense of belonging (Drebing et al., 2018; Hawkins & Crowe, 2018; Heineman, 2017). Moreover, many female veterans find that having the opportunity to connect with a fellow female veteran who can understand the experiences she has had within the military, as well as the responsibilities and pressures of being a wife and a mother outside of her service, can be of great emotional and therapeutic value (Stockdale et al., 2019). The project described in the next section combined the creation of a women-veteran writing workshop on campus in partnership with a local community organization: The Herstory Writers Workshop of Long Island. The placement of the workshop on campus was an intentional decision to help attract participants that were either currently matriculated female student veterans or older female veterans within the local community to help combat feelings of isolation and create a sense of community. The workshop was run by a trained Herstory facilitator, using its methodology and curriculum, and was held in tandem with undergraduate students enrolled in an upper-level English course titled “The Literature of War.” As such, the creation of this workshop was a deliberate attempt to create a micro-community within the classroom between the female [student] veteran participants and the civilian students enrolled in “The Literature of War,” as opposed to a broader campus-wide initiative.

I was inspired to create a partnership between Herstory and the female [student] veterans not only because of the lack of contemporary female focused/authored war novels and memoirs, but also by the desire to create a meaningful service-learning experience for both the civilian students and veterans involved. The mission behind the chosen partner organization, the Herstory Writers Workshop of Long Island, is to bring unheard voices into the public arena, transforming lived experiences into written memoirs powerful enough to change hearts, minds, and policy. Since its founding in 1996, the Herstory program has implemented workshops in secondary and higher education institutions, jails, and within local communities on Long Island, offering workshops in both English and in Spanish. In doing so, they strive to create a body of living literature that is meant to be shared to promote empathy, change, and compassion. Those that lead Herstory writing workshops are known as “facilitators,” and all Herstory facilitators must complete a formal 13-week training institute and conduct a 12-week field placement as part of their preparation to oversee these workshops. The workshops allowed my students and the female vets to first think and reflect, then draft, and then

polish memoirs about their experiences with war, whether those experiences were direct (in the case of the veterans) or peripheral (in the case of many of the students writing about stories from their siblings, parents, or grandparents who had a deeper relationship with the military).

In addition, the workshop participants are guided by two different “textbooks” written by Herstory’s founder and artistic director, Erika Duncan: *Paper Stranger* and *Dare to Care*. Both textbooks contain example memoir pieces from past Herstory workshop participants, brainstorming exercises, and a glossary of Herstory terminology. Such terminology, which includes words like “jaggedy,” “backstitching,” and “deorganization” to describe one’s writing, was highly useful as it gave the students in the course, who were all English majors and advanced writers, the same lexicon to talk about their memoir in-progress as the [student] veterans who were less advanced and did not have the same rhetorical awareness. The two most important Herstory vocabulary terms that guided all participants writing were:

1. the idea of the “paper stranger/reader,” simply another word for audience awareness and a call to remind the writer that they were trying to draw in an imaginary reader who does not inherently care about their story unless the writer makes them
2. the “page one moment,” which is the way we referred to where the story “begins” and asks, “Why that moment out of all the memories you could choose from?”

The “Literature of War” course met three times a week on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays with the Herstory workshop held each Monday for the latter 9 weeks of the semester. Each week at these meetings, both the female [student] veterans and the civilian students were able to come together and share their writing, edits from the previous week, and real-time feedback with one another. Overall, 15 original memoir pieces were produced, and the students and veterans were invited to a small celebration at the end of the semester where they could share a chosen portion of their memoir piece aloud.

The experiential approach described above mutually benefited the Herstory Writers Workshop and the [student] veteran participants. Experiential and service-learning are proven effective educational models for student veterans because high-impact projects that directly involve the local community tend to produce more engagement among the student veteran population (Stockdale et al., 2019). These types of projects that stem out of community partnerships allow for authentic learning experiences within the classroom, encourage students

to focus on recognizing and addressing the needs of a particular demographic or subgroup (in this case, female [student] veterans), and help increase understanding and respect between the two groups involved by the close of the project (Smith, 2018). Further, a semester-long experiential learning project like this one, which utilized a relatively small peer group, can help student veterans achieve a sense of belonging in the classroom. As Kat Blackwell-Starnes (2018) argues:

The familiar structure of the peer group allows student veterans to ease into the individual classroom setting, but it also places them in constant contact with peer group members with whom they will interact throughout the semester, thus preventing them from isolating themselves from their classmates and furthering their ability to transition into academic life. (p. 33)

Importantly, service-learning inspired partnerships also help narrow the military-civilian gap within the micro-space of the classroom because they necessitate an engagement between the academic and local communities that the civilian students and student veterans navigate daily. The Herstory Writers Workshop, in turn, had been trying for years to reach the veteran community, but had no platform—like the literature course—to recruit participants meaningfully and effectively. Together, the partnership between the civilian students and female [student] veterans addressed a clear problem: the lack of female veteran narratives available to the public. Throughout the semester, they then worked together to help forge a solution: creating a space for those veterans to write and share their stories in a supportive and structured environment. In doing so, we were able to adapt concepts about the value of memoir writing and bibliotherapy for veterans from the “Literature of War” course towards practical solutions via the workshop.

More specifically, the form of experiential learning happening within the Herstory workshops each week can also be described and analyzed along the axis of Story Theory. Story Theory, a technique used predominantly within nursing as opposed to writing pedagogy, is a middle-range nursing theory that describes story as a narrative happening through intentional listening and dialogue to create ease. It is a dynamic process in which the storyteller attentively embraces the story as it surfaces (Smith & Liehr, 2005). Effective Story Theory is hinged upon the following factors:

- **Intentional dialogue** (i.e., purposeful engagement with the veteran and really listening to her story)

- **Connecting with self-in-relation** (seeing the self as connected to others in one's story plot; allowing emotions and thoughts to resurface in the retelling)
- **Creating ease** (stories are told, repeated back to the teller as the listener understood the events shared, and then confirmed by the veteran as the "truth"; Maiocco & Smith, 2016; Smith & Liehr, 2005)

Much like James Pennebaker's (1997) seminal essay on the disclosure paradigm and writing about emotional experiences as a therapeutic process, Story Theory supports Pennebaker's original findings that when individuals are given the opportunity to disclose deeply personal aspects of their lives in a safe and encouraging environment, they readily do so. In their 2016 study on the experience of female veterans coming back from war, Gina Maiocco and Mary Jane Smith utilized Story Theory in their interviews with eight female veterans coming back from war in order to help uncover similar themes in their otherwise diverse homecoming experiences. Ultimately, their study concluded that using Story Theory as part of a mental health visit can be beneficial to veterans as they deal with their homecoming transition.

Though the framework for the "Combat Silence" initiative was based on Herstory's bibliotherapeutic memoir writing methodology, Story Theory's elements of encouraging the sharing of, intentionally listening to, and helping craft one's personal narrative of their time at/experience with combat and the military was something the workshop participants engaged in weekly. The Herstory facilitator leading the weekly "Combat Silence" workshop—Laurel Jansen Breen, RN, PhD, CNE—was a retired nurse and educator, whose clinical work and qualitative research focuses on the development and maintenance of academic-practice partnerships and community writing. With experience teaching nursing at a local Long Island college for nearly 20 years, Dr. Breen was an ideal facilitator for the initiative and, because she was formally trained and certified in counseling, her expertise helped assuage civilian student and female [student] veterans whose "page one" moments were difficult to express and process into a cohesive narrative. Though a Story Theory approach can be highly therapeutic for certain individuals, it can lead to a reliving or retraumatization upon the retelling; consequently, such stories should be shared only within safe environments and among trusted listeners (Giesler & Juarez, 2019). As many of the female [student] veterans in the group explicitly brought up highly traumatic memories from their service—such as coming home to find a fiancé had committed suicide, as well as implied MST from a male commanding officer—knowing that the person facilitating the workshop each week was qualified to do so from both a pedagogical and professional standpoint was comforting to all participants.

## **BENEFIT 1: VETERAN PARTICIPANTS EMBRACED THEIR FEMININITY AS PART OF, AND NOT SEPARATE FROM, THEIR MILITARY IDENTITY**

The structure of the Herstory workshop had numerous benefits for the female [student] veteran participants, but perhaps its first and most obvious benefit was that it afforded them the unique opportunity to share their combat and military service memories in a small peer group comprised of fellow female veterans only. Out of the 18 individuals who attended the workshop each week—containing 11 undergraduate students enrolled in "The Literature of War," five female [student] veterans, Dr. Breen as the Herstory facilitator, and myself as the instructor of record for the course—the gendered makeup of the workshop was 90% female. Such a percentage starkly contrasts the general makeup of military units and veteran organizations as predominantly male with female members deeply in the minority, thus helping the participants feel secure and empowered within the workshop space. The demographic of the female [student] veteran participants by military branch were as follows: one from the Airforce, two from the Army, and two from the Navy. This demographic breakdown made sense given that the Marines have historically had the lowest percentage of female enlistees due to decades of ground combat exclusion policies, while the Air Force and Navy have the highest percentages of women enlistees (Eager, 2014, pp. 21–39). All five of the female veteran participants were white. In our recruitment emails, we asked interested female veterans to explain what attracted them to the workshop and what they hoped to gain from it. The women who contacted us to participate in this pilot community writing group listed different reasons for wanting to join, but the common factor amongst all their responses was that they were intrigued by the opportunity to write and share their memories of war exclusively alongside other women. In their emails of interest, they expressed the following sentiments:

- "It would be a wonderful experience to join other women veterans to explore, share and express our 'Herstory'"
- "Years of rebuilding and repairing myself has brought me to where I am today, and I would love to be able to share at least pieces of that journey with other female veterans who may be living through those dark days"
- "I would love to enlighten people to women veterans and their experiences and needs in the civilian world"

Such statements underscore both the benefit and novelty of female veterans intentionally coming together to discuss and write, and also highlights common emotions and

themes that such an activity can help illuminate, namely, combatting feelings of isolation, addressing issues females face during their service, and celebrating female legacies within the military.

The Herstory workshop's emphasis on soliciting stories about servicewomen's military experience allowed the veteran participants to acknowledge and overturn female behavioral expectations they may have internalized during their service. Military culture can encourage servicewomen to stifle their femininity in both overt and nuanced ways: although servicewomen are thought to possess "desirable" feminine traits such as being even-tempered, nurturing, and tolerant, they are also stereotyped with embodying "undesirable" feminine traits such as being timid, mild, passive, submissive, modest, temperamental, and fragile (Heinecken, 2017, pp. 204, 205). Stereotypes that servicewomen are "good listeners" or sister/mother-like figures for their male comrades can put an undue amount of emotional labor on women who serve and make them feel that they are not allowed to express their own angers or fears connected to their military experience. Further, because servicewomen have been thought of as "less than" their male counterparts in terms of physical strength and endurance, many do not want to risk further denigrating their reputation as a capable soldier by showing emotional instability (crying, outbursts, depressive episodes) during their service or upon homecoming. Jennifer Eager (2014) explains this double behavioral standard:

Female veterans are just as prone to fits of rage, insomnia, nightmares, depression, survivor's guilt, and fears of crowds; but culturally, society expects the female veteran to comport herself in the same manner as before her deployment. Women are not supposed to punch a wall or show aggression upon her return home. It especially makes it more difficult if a female veteran has a family waiting for her to resume all the roles she may have fulfilled before deployment. (pp. 80-81)

Ironically, though one of the categorically "desirable" traits of servicewomen is that they are thought to be "expressive," many servicewomen do not express their true thoughts and emotions at the risk of jeopardizing their unit's cohesion, or level of unification and bondage with one another. There are two types of cohesion: task (related to how well a unit behaves like a team in battle), and social (related to the depth of the emotional bonds and friendships among unit members; Eager, 2014). For many decades, this "cohesion argument" was used to justify servicewomen being "attached" rather than "assigned" to a given unit and their inability to participate in most combat positions until very recently.<sup>2</sup>

Within the space of the workshop, the female [student] veterans were expressly encouraged to explain how their

feminine traits and female subject position informed their memories of their service and their relationship to the military through both their writing and verbal dialogue with the civilian students. While deployed, servicewomen often find it easier to conform and assimilate masculine forms of behavior and masculine values, not out of preference, but as a survival strategy (Heinecken, 2017). As a result, the female [student] veterans in the Herstory workshop had to reorient themselves so that maintaining social cohesion within the workshop space meant *embracing* those same traits and asserting their voice without hesitancy or shame. Further, this expression was made easier given that the Herstory methodology is structured so that "everybody talks" within a workshop session. Each week, both the students and veterans would form one circle where each participant would share their writing for that week and were encouraged to offer their feedback to others. This model meant that all workshop participants shouldered equal emotional vulnerability, and symbolized to the female veterans that the workshop was able to provide them the important group therapy attributes of secure emotional expression (i.e., hearing others echo their concerns helped normalize and validate the way they felt), and interpersonal impact (increased/replicated feelings of community from their military life; Cox et al., 2017; Giesler & Juarez, 2019).

## **BENEFIT 2: VETERAN/CIVILIAN DYNAMICS SUPPORTED AN ASSET-BASED PEDAGOGICAL MODEL**

Second, the veteran/civilian dynamic of the workshop allowed for the development of an asset-based pedagogical model where the veterans' perspectives and experiences were fostered as resources to the course's objectives and learning outcomes of making the study of contemporary war literature more diverse and inclusive. Asset versus deficit pedagogical models are both related to working with particular communities (such as veterans) but differ in their approach: asset-based models focus on the strengths, benefits, and opportunities associated with a particular community, group, or demographic, whereas deficit-based models focus on identifying its problems or weaknesses. Asset-based approaches try and explicate what is "right" versus what is "wrong" with a given community and believes that individuals who are part of that community or group each have untapped or underutilized resources and capabilities that can be cultivated to both individual and community benefit. Asset-based pedagogical approaches towards student veterans tend to be rare, while deficit-models are much more common. Typically,



post-secondary (civilian) instructors are aware that a student-veteran community exists on campus, but most are not aware what veteran resources exist on campus and have likely not been formally trained to interact with their veteran students (Hart & Thompson, 2013; Wilkes, 2017). Such a dynamic unfortunately reinforces beliefs held among the veteran community that civilians do not appreciate their military experience; according to a 2015 report, “Roughly 84% of veterans believe that the public does not understand the problems they face, and 71% of the public agrees with that sentiment” (Flink, 2017, p. 7). Veterans tend to have considerable assets as students, including maturity, a sense of purpose or mission orientation, a readiness to learn and apply knowledge to solve problems, experience working in or leading teams to solve problems, and behaving as a professional member of a large organization (Wilkes, 2017). As Hart and Thompson (2020) aptly summarize:

Courses [that] recognize veterans as a group with particular strengths... provide a means of, to invoke military language, remobilization that allows student veterans more transparency in making their educational decisions... The classroom becomes a space where both the veteran identity and the student identity can be honored and performed. (p. 93)

Using a term like “asset” (whether directly in the form of a veterans syllabi statement or course learning objectives, or implied through the selection of course readings and class discussions) can be a better option than deferentially referring to student veterans as “heroic,” which can embarrass those student veterans who have difficulty with memories of their service, or who served in reservist as opposed to active-duty positions.

An asset-based approach like the one used in Herstory workshop and within the classroom particularly benefitted the female [student] veterans we were trying to reach because it acknowledged the nuanced nature of the veteran community: something a deficit-model does not typically account for. While recruiting for the workshop, Herstory founder Erika Duncan crafted a special edition of Herstory’s e-newsletter to advertise the course and workshop titled “Missing Pages in the Literature of War.” Her approach in the newsletter was asset-focused as she stressed the importance of students and women veterans writing about their experience of war side by side in order to spark dialogue and reflection between civilian and military perspectives on combat. The questions we asked in our call for participants were as follows:

- What would happen if we brought together women who joined the military for a host of different reasons, women who were using their experiences in the war to work for peace and women who had very different views?
- What silences would we be able to break? What wisdom would we be able to garner, to help us navigate our contemporary world?
- What contributions would the student writers make, and how would their presence dare the veteran writers to go deeper into their own stories, to find the words that they most wanted the world to hear?

Rather than focusing on the “problems” that affect the female veteran community, of which there are many—lack of resources, lack of proper diagnoses for mental injury, lower enlistment numbers, lack of cohesion while deployed, etc.—both the course and the workshop instead focused on helping female [student] veterans find a solution to their lack of comradery and community. The course was structured so that for the first 5 weeks I had the students all three days so they could learn about common themes and motifs within war literature. We read psychoanalytic theory about trauma, as well as poems and novels from WWI before moving in hyper-speed to read some memoirs and pieces from Iraq War veterans such as Brian Turner and John Crawford. Before the workshop meetings began, my students and I read two female veteran authored Iraq War memoirs: Kayla Williams’ *Love My Rifle More Than You: Young and Female in the US Army*, and Shoshana Johnson’s *I’m Still Standing: From Captive US Soldier to Female Citizen*. Williams’ memoir focuses on the sexual assault of female service members, and Johnson’s focuses on the challenges of being a female POW. Reading Johnson’s memoir also gave the class an opportunity to discuss how she was in the same unit as Jessica Lynch, whose capture, sexual assault, and subsequent struggles with PTSD were sensationalized via news media during the Iraq War, while Johnson’s involvement as the only other female POW in the unit was minimized, in part, due to her subject position as an African American single mother. In addition to reading these memoirs, research librarians at Stony Brook University (SBU) libraries helped me obtain a copy of Kirby Dick’s award-winning 2012 documentary *The Invisible War*, which chronicles the culture of secrecy surrounding the sexual assault of female service members and arranged a screening that my students could attend for extra credit in the course. Reading and viewing these works before the workshop started helped ensure that the students realized the profound lack of female authored scholarship and literature within veteran studies and the severe obstacles of simply being a woman in the military before interacting with some members of the female veteran community.

Further, the female veterans were empowered and encouraged by having a safe space to work on their memoir essays and to talk about their time in the military to a group of civilian undergraduates who not only *wanted* to hear about their experiences, but also knew from reading scholarship and literature about the war in Iraq that their perspective was *needed*. In keeping with the asset-based model's emphasis on cultivating an individual's attributes, we emphasized in the workshop how the different women who shared their stories contributed to the military in a myriad of ways—from being Army medics to Air Force pilots—and celebrated, through our discussions and suggested edits, how their experiences represented a trajectory of increased female involvement in the armed forces.

### **BENEFIT 3: FEMALE [STUDENT] VETERAN PARTICIPANTS WROTE ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCE FOR AN AUTHENTIC AUDIENCE**

Third, the Herstory workshop's method supports research that it is beneficial to give student veterans authentic writing assignments. Authentic writing projects that are "personally meaningful" as well as "goal-oriented" can serve both adult and veteran students who have a multitude of reasons for returning to school and thus a variety of points of readiness (Cleary & Wozniak, 2013, p. 4). Because returning veterans are generally unlikely to find community partners willing to engage with them, a community writing group like the workshop offered the female veterans who participated a means to find social support and engage in writing the story they most wanted their civilian counterparts in the workshop to hear. The writings produced by the participants in the workshop were "private" in the sense that their work produced in between meetings was not formally graded or collected, and they could choose how much or little to share with the group each week. The students/student veterans enrolled in "The Literature of War" had a percentage of their semester grade attributed to their progress in the workshop, but this was based on their attendance and their participation each week; their actual writing was also not collected or formally graded. However, Herstory offered all participants the opportunity to publish their work on Herstory's newly created online database or for the potential for a portion of their memoir to appear as an example piece in an updated version of *Paper Stranger* or *Dare to Care*. Further, participants were informed that the long-term goal of this pilot program for female [student] veterans was to run the initiative again in future semesters to generate enough content to eventually create a physical edited collection of

their memoir pieces, similar to veteran community writing groups at other universities, such as Syracuse University (*The Weight of My Armor*, ed. Ivy Kleinbart, Peter McShane, and Eileen Schell) and UC Santa Barbara (*Instant Separation*).

Authentic publication prospects such as these motivated the female veterans to work diligently on their pieces to eventually share it with civilians who likely had limited knowledge about the female military experience, and to help explicate the diversity of military experience in general, through their writing. Veteran community writing groups have been proven effective due to their ability to nurture veterans' contact with civilian society and help veterans speak out about their experience without steering their writing through a particular political agenda or trying to mold their recollections to "align with a master narrative about what war [is] supposed to mean to US society" (Usbeck, 2018). Many of the female veterans who participated in the group already had authentic writing in process in the forms of blogs, partial memoir drafts, or collections of poems. In their emails of interest, many expressed that they were interested in participating in the workshop because it would be an excuse for them to work more consistently on their current projects, while also benefiting from the civilian "sounding board" that would be the potential reaction of those outside of the military to their stories. As such, the workshop became a microcosm of the military-civilian dialogue that might be sparked by their finished memoirs, poems, and other narrative projects. Working week to week on their memoir for Herstory was not simply an "assignment," but a concerted effort to continue to develop a piece of writing that was real, of great personal importance, and existed outside the workshop and classroom.

Something the civilian students seemed to struggle with more than the veterans was formatting their memoir pieces. According to the Herstory methodology, writers should focus on bringing their readers right into their story physically and emotionally instead of explaining what happened. Herstory refers to this as having "thereness" in the memoir rather than "aboutness." "Thereness" brings a reader into a place where she feels like she is inside the narrative in real time (often in present tense), while "aboutness" simply tells the reader "about" the story (often in past tense). The memoir pieces were meant to have a "point" or a "moral" they wanted their "stranger reader" to take away, but this should not be directly explained to the reader; instead, the "thereness" of the piece should make that takeaway clear. Although some of the civilian students and vets were able to tap into the "thereness" right away, others went through many drafts of their pieces until they landed on the story/moment/setup that felt right. While the veterans had an easier time discussing their war stories, many of the students struggled with finding a story they felt was appropriate, authentic, and relative

to war. However, as our sessions progressed it turned out that many of these students did, in fact, have very strong, authentic connections to the military they found they could use as a springboard, including the following:

- A student who had a sister who was newly enrolled in ROTC
- A student who recalled a memory of driving down to an Army recruiting center before deciding the military “wasn’t for him”
- A student who wrote about how the combination of the class and the workshop was making her rethink her family’s pride in the military and reconsider their suggestions that she enlist in the Navy to help pay for medical school.

Many of the students were apprehensive about “comparing” their own stories and experiences to the female [student] veterans’ experiences and worried how to approach our writing group with sensitivity and respect. But eventually the students realized that even though their perspectives were not as enmeshed in the military, the two groups enjoyed hearing one another’s perspectives on war. Using the authentic curriculum of the Herstory approach and its emphasis on this non-traditional writing style was thus highly beneficial to equalizing the labor of crafting an effective memoir for both the students and the veterans. Although the students were advanced English majors with excellent critical analysis and academic writing skills, the Herstory model emphasizes that memoir writing is a messy, non-linear process (what they would call “jaggedy”) that cannot be approached the same way as a “normal” classroom writing assignment or essay. This proved extremely advantageous for the female veterans participating in the workshop who were not students, and who had much less practice writing formally. These older veterans did not feel inferior to the writing level of the civilian students/student veterans, since everyone was attempting the Herstory style of memoir for the first time.

#### **BENEFIT 4: THE WORKSHOP INCORPORATED SPECIFIC RESOURCES AND ELEMENTS THAT STUDENT VETERANS WANT THEIR UNIVERSITIES TO OFFER**

Fourth and finally, the Herstory workshop’s format was modeled to adopt specific resources and elements that student veterans have expressed as wanting their university to offer. Student veterans do not want their university to “fix” or pity them, but they do appreciate faculty support

(Valentino, 2012). Recently surveyed student veterans stated they would like to see more of the following resources on their campus:

1. peer support, tutoring, and mentorship
2. screenings for Traumatic Brain Injuries and Polytrauma Clinical Triad
3. financial support in the way of scholarships, jobs, and internships, and bridge funding when their GI Bill benefits are exhausted
4. military education credit and enhanced access to information, courses, and counseling services. (Elnitsky et al., 2018, p. 63)

In particular, they expressed a desire to create veteran peer support groups that bring together veterans at similar points in their academic trajectories, more outreach to veterans who do not actively seek out campus resources themselves, and acceptance of their military credit towards current academic goals. All these preferences are in the interest of expediting the veteran’s time spent in school and maximum efficiency of their GI Bill credits.

The Herstory workshop was an endeavor that consciously considered ways that faculty and staff at SBU could work to increase student veterans’ success. As Brandy Jenner (2017) argues about the transition of student veterans to the university:

There is little research on the role that faculty and staff can play in the transition to higher education [for] 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. (p. 13)

We engaged in active dialogue with the university’s Office of Veterans Affairs to determine how we could best situate this workshop so that it was attractive to student veterans. At the suggestion of the Coordinator of Veterans Affairs—herself a female Iraq War Army veteran—one strategy we employed was to advertise that students who enrolled in the workshop could do so for zero billable credits, but would earn experiential learning credit (EXP) to apply toward their general education requirements. EXP necessitates the application of knowledge and skills from the classroom beyond the classroom through real-world experience that enhances academic success and professional development. An additional requirement for EXP credit is that the service-learning experience must occur while the student

is matriculated at SBU through a course’s community partnership or an internship; many student veterans struggle to complete their experiential learning requirement at SBU and become frustrated that their military service does not count as “experiential” because it happened in the past. In coordination with administrative officials in the department of English, we arranged it so that the student vets could enroll in the workshop for zero credits, which enabled them to write about their past experiences in the military in order to earn EXP credits in the present, without the added burden of necessarily enrolling in the “Literature of War” course affiliated with the workshop. Because “The Literature of War,” was an upper-level English course, enrollment in the class was limited to English majors. The zero-credit aspect of the workshop made it so the veterans could benefit from participating without extending their timeline to degree or sacrificing GI Bill education credits. Moreover, we also contacted the Academic Advising Office responsible for working with student veterans so they could advertise the workshop to female [student] veterans missing EXP. These parameters made sure that as many student veterans who might be interested in the workshop were informed of its existence, especially those less involved in student veteran resources on campus, and also worked to help validate their past military experience while in contemporary pursuit of their degree.

### TAKEAWAYS FROM THE WORKSHOP FOR [CIVILIAN] STUDENTS AND [STUDENT] VETERANS

In addition to the general benefits described in the previous section, the Herstory workshop generated

specific social and pedagogical outcomes for both the civilian students simultaneously enrolled in the course and workshop, and the female [student] veterans who participated in the workshop only. The female veterans involved not only responded to the students’ work and engaged with them in dialogue about the realities of military life for women, but themselves learned more about what the demographic of college-age civilians wants and needs to learn about the veteran experience. In their anonymous evaluations of the workshop, the female [student] veterans emphasized the feelings of community and support the workshop provided them. Specifically, they expressed the workshop’s value in giving them a “sense of empathy and collective encouragement,” how the workshop became a “family” and a “support system” the more often it met and the more writing was shared between participants, and gave them the ability to “ask questions about [them]selves and others to see how stories have shaped them.” As it relates to their composing, the female [student] veterans indicated in their anonymous workshop evaluations that they took away the following (*Table 1*).

The civilian students who participated in the workshop also received numerous pedagogical benefits that are atypical of regular literature and composition courses. In their anonymous course evaluations at the end of the semester, many of them reflected that the course was particularly valuable because of its emphasis on “actively learning about others’ experiences,” and focusing on the “content of the story and not the writing technicalities.” They agreed that the experience of interacting with and writing alongside veterans was much more powerful than simply reading “books about war,” and they also voiced that the combination of the workshop and the course

VETERAN BENEFIT	DESCRIPTION
<b>Selecting the story/memory they most wanted to tell</b>	Though many of the students stuck to their story once they figured out what it was, the numerous memories the veteran participants had about their time at war made deciding on one story/page one moment very challenging. Many of the veterans remembered fragmented moments/sensations, but a cohesive story or memory was harder to come by. The Herstory methodology of choosing a singular “Page One” moment helped them create (or begin the process of creating) a linear narrative about their service.
<b>Finding their voice and reclaiming agency for their time at war</b>	In addition to having some trouble deciding on a story, many of the veteran participants struggled with the voice and perspective they used to tell their story. One female veteran spent the first few sessions writing about herself in the third person and from the viewpoint of her dogs. By the end of the workshop, she had produced a totally different “Page One” moment in her own voice, using the first-person, and beginning to address memories of MST from a male commanding officer.
<b>Finding a supportive peer group that used a specific methodology for bibliotherapeutic memoir writing</b>	As many of the vets addressed in their emails of interest, it was novel to find a workshop devoted exclusively to women veterans and many appreciated the all-female emphasis. One of the veterans who participated in the workshop who was a former Army medic is currently participating in Herstory’s facilitator training institute to lead Herstory workshops herself in the future.

**Table 1** [Student] Veteran Workshop Benefits.

content convinced them that “Everyone is affected by war, one way or another.” Some of their specific pedagogical advantages, which are a mixture of what was stated in their anonymous course evaluations and what was observed by me as their instructor, included (Table 2).

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE INITIATIVES

Despite the success of this female [student] veteran community writing group, future iterations of this type of initiative would do well to consider the obstacles and challenges that made its pilot run less impactful than it had the potential to be. First, more intensive and deliberate recruiting strategies would likely have resulted in a greater number of female [student] veteran participants. Because most of the recruiting took place in mid-late summer for the following fall semester, emails and flyers around campus were not as visible to students than if they had been disseminated and posted in the spring when students

were planning their fall course schedules. Moreover, having a member of the female veteran community actively recruiting for the workshop would have boosted the initiative’s ethos in the eyes of the female veteran community we were trying to reach. The day and time that the workshop was held also posed challenges to the number of recruits who enrolled. Because the Herstory workshop was held in tandem with “The Literature of War,” it needed to take place during the 9–10 a.m. timeframe the course met on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays to guarantee it would not conflict with the students’ course schedules. This time frame excluded female veterans who were not students and who wanted to participate but could not, due to having a traditional nine to five job. In the future, offering portions of the workshop in the evenings, on weekends, or even in an online setting could result in more veteran participants. Finally, many of the civilian students enrolled in the course suggested that the workshop be run in tandem with a lower-level English or composition course so that more students could benefit from the course and the workshop together without the

[CIVILIAN] STUDENT BENEFIT	DESCRIPTION
<b>Using stories to reorient themselves to their family’s history and relationship to war</b>	Because many of the students enrolled in the literature course were not veterans themselves, their memoirs delved into stories passed to them from parents and grandparents. For example, two students incorporated war stories from their grandmothers about civil wars in countries like Bangladesh and Korea in their respective memoirs.
<b>Using skills honed by their major in new and unexpected ways</b>	Though the course was limited to students who were English majors, many students were double majoring in other subjects including journalism, history, and psychology. Two students double-majoring in English and journalism interviewed family members and consulted archives to learn more about their family’s relationship to the military: one of those students discovered that her great-grandmother was only born to fill the loss of her eldest brother dying in combat during WWI, while the other journalism student discovered that his grandfather wrote an Emmy-winning episode of M*A*S*H. A student majoring in English and history framed her memoir piece through a comparison of “factually” learning about wars in history courses versus the “empathetic” approach she viewed occurring in our English course. A student majoring in English and Psychology was able to craft a critical analysis paper on bibliotherapy using texts from the course in addition to her experience with the female veterans in the workshop. All of these examples help support research that claims that “Any class that grapples with veterans studies is inherently interdisciplinary” since “understanding the positionality of veterans in American society requires knowledge that transcends traditional disciplinary boundaries” (Hodges, 2018, p. 94).
<b>Revising</b>	Outside of first year composition classrooms, the opportunity to consistently draft, receive peer feedback, and revise one piece of writing for a substantial portion of the semester does not often occur for most college students. By the workshop’s close the majority of the students in the course voiced that they felt exceptionally “proud” of their finished memoir piece, many planned to continue to add to and edit their memoir, and most wished the workshop was longer than the nine weeks it was in session.
<b>Learning about the public humanities and making connections to the campus community</b>	Throughout the semester, students in “The Literature of War” were offered numerous extra credit opportunities through attendance at veteran-themed events on campus. Such activities and events included the university’s annual Veterans Day Ceremony, a “tent city” event held overnight to increase awareness about veteran homelessness, a film screening of <i>The Invisible War</i> and <i>Lone Survivor</i> , and a “literary karaoke” event hosted by SBU libraries whose theme was writings by or about veterans. Many of the students expressed in their evaluations that they did not know such events existed but were glad the course encouraged them to learn more about their campus community and the resources it had for veterans. Further, one of the student veterans enrolled in the workshop was the key-note speaker for the Veterans Day Ceremony, and the event became a site for the students and [student] veterans to congregate and support one another outside the specific confines of the workshop environment.

Table 2 [Civilian] Student Workshop Benefits.

barrier of being an English major and enrolling in an upper-level course. Though this suggestion would increase the number of participants in the workshop, it would likely make the workshop too large for everyone to share their writing each week. Further, students who are STEM majors as opposed to Humanities majors might find balancing the reading level of the course, working on their memoir pieces, and writing literary analysis papers for the course very challenging in addition to their responsibilities for their other courses.

Completing this experiential, service-learning inspired project helped diversify “The Literature of War” syllabus and include the more marginalized voices of female veterans. It also established real-life connections to various organizations within our local community so that my students could interact with and benefit from pedagogical exercises and events that aligned with the course’s learning outcomes of making the study of war literature more diverse and inclusive. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it has encouraged myself, my students, and especially the female veterans who participated to reconceive the value of memoir and community writing for former soldiers by expanding the parameters of whose voices get to be heard, celebrated, widely taught, and valued.

## NOTES

- 1 The Post-9/11 GI Bill of 2008, alternatively known as the Post-9/11 Veterans’ Educational Assistance Act of 2008, featured revisions to previous veteran educational legislation, with notable updates such as the expansion of the previous Veterans’ Educational Assistance Program to include the Reserve Educational Assistance Program, which ensured that military reservists received the same educational benefits as those in active duty, and the ability of the veteran to transfer his/her benefits to a spouse or child after serving (Hammond, 2017). The bill, which has a housing allowance of around \$1,500 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 \$1,000 yearly as a book stipend, incentivizes today’s veterans to attend public college in a state where they have residency status (Jenner, 2017). These limitations deter most veterans from attending what would be prohibitively expensive private universities, or results in their spending the first two years of their undergraduate education at a community college before transferring to a four-year university in order to cut down their out-of-pocket costs. This latter option, especially common amongst first-generation student veterans who view the military’s education incentives as a stepping-stone toward future economic stability, necessitates that the student veteran undergo a series of difficult social transitions—from the educational climate of the two-year college to the four-year college—in addition to his/her transition out of the military and back into civilian life. Because military culture is so highly organized and regulated, student veterans adjusting to the freedom and ambiguity of campus life can be overwhelmed (Flink, 2017).
- 2 As Eager explains, the official rhetoric used by the military further enforced the separation and lack of social cohesion a servicewoman felt existed between herself and her unit. A servicewoman was often referred to as being “attached” as opposed to formally being “assigned” to a combat unit to connote a sense of accompaniment and subservience rather than her

capability or equality. The use of this discriminatory rhetoric was only recently overturned via legislation passed by Congress in 2012, which stated that servicewomen had the right to be “assigned” to their combat unit.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## AUTHOR AFFILIATION

Meghan Buckley  [orcid.org/0000-0002-0126-8469](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0126-8469)  
Stony Brook University, US

## REFERENCES

- Blackwell-Starnes, K.** (2018). At ease: Developing veterans’ sense of belonging in the college classroom. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 3(1), 18. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.2>
- Cleary, M. N., & Wozniak, K.** (2013). Veterans as adult learners in composition courses. *Composition Forum*, 28, 1–15. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1016751.pdf>
- Cox, D. W., Owen, J. J., & Ogrodniczuk, J. S.** (2017). Group psychotherapeutic factors and perceived social support among veterans with PTSD symptoms. *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 205(2), 127–32. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1097/NMD.0000000000000635>
- Donald, H. M.** (2019). Opinion: Women don’t belong in combat units. *Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/women-dont-belong-in-combat-units-11547411638>
- Drebing, C. E., Reilly, E., Henze, K. T., Kelly, M., Russo, A., Smolinsky, J., Gorman, J., & Penk, W. E.** (2018). Using peer support groups to enhance community integration of veterans in transition. *Psychological Services*, 15(2), 135–45. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1037/ser0000178>
- Eager, P. W.** (2014). *Waging gendered wars: US military women in Afghanistan and Iraq*. Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- Elnitsky, C. A., Blevins, C., Findlow, J. W., Alverio, T., & Wiese, D.** (2018). Student veterans reintegrating from the military to the university with traumatic injuries: How does service use relate to health status? *Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation*, 99(2), S58–64. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apmr.2017.10.008>
- Flink, P. J.** (2017). Invisible disabilities, stigma, and student veterans: Contextualizing the transition to higher education. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 2(2), 110. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.20>
- Giesler, M., & Juarez, A.** (2019). “I have served to tell”: A qualitative study of veterans’ reactions on participating in a Living Library project. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 5(1), 34. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v5i1.148>

- Gilmore, A. K., Brignone, E., Painter, J. M., Lehavot, K., Fargo, J., Suo, Y., Simpson, T., Carter, M. E., Blais, R. K., & Gundlapalli, A. V.** (2016). Military sexual trauma and co-occurring Posttraumatic stress disorder, depressive disorders, and substance use disorders among returning Afghanistan and Iraq veterans. *Women's Health Issues, 26*(5), 546–54. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.whi.2016.07.001>
- Hammond, S.** (2017). Student veterans in higher education: a conversation six decades in the making. *New Directions for Institutional Research, 2016*(171), 11–21. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/ir.20191>
- Hart, A. D., & Thompson, R.** (2013). “An ethical obligation”: Promising practices for student veterans in college writing classrooms. *NCTE/CCCC, 1–19*. <https://secure.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Groups/CCCC/AnEthicalObligation.pdf>
- Hart, A. D., & Thompson, R.** (2020). *Writing programs, veterans studies, and the post-9/11 university: A field guide*. National Council of Teachers of English.
- Haskell, S. G., Mattocks, K., Goulet, J. L., Krebs, E. E., Skanderson, M., Leslie, D., Justice, A. C., Yano, E. M., & Brandt, C.** (2011). The burden of illness in the first year home: Do male and female VA users differ in health conditions and healthcare utilization. *Women's Health Issues, 21*(1), 92–97. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.whi.2010.08.001>
- Hawkins, B. L., & Crowe, B. M.** (2018). Contextual facilitators and barriers of community reintegration among injured female military veterans: A qualitative study. *Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, 99*(2), S65–71. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apmr.2017.07.018>
- Heineken, L.** (2017). Conceptualizing the tensions evoked by gender integration in the military: The South African case. *Armed Forces & Society, 43*(2), 202–220. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X16670692>
- Heineman, J. A.** (2017). From boots to suits: Women veterans transitioning to community college students. *New Directions for Community Colleges, 2017*(179), 77–88. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.20264>
- Hodges, E.** (2018). Teaching veterans studies: Bridging the gap between US civilians and veterans through the college classroom. *Journal of Veterans Studies, 3*(1), 89. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.7>
- Jenner, B. M.** (2017). Student veterans and the transition to higher education: Integrating existing literatures. *Journal of Veterans Studies, 2*(2), 26. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.14>
- Katz, L. S., Huffman, C., & Cojucar, G.** (2017). In her own words: Semi-structured interviews of women veterans who experienced military sexual assault. *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy, 47*(3), 181–89. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10879-016-9349-0>
- Maiocco, G., & Smith, M. J.** (2016). The experience of women veterans coming back from war. *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing, 30*(3), 393–99. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apnu.2016.01.008>
- Mattocks, K. M., Haskell, S. G., Krebs, E. E., Justice, A. C., Yano, E. M., & Brandt, C.** (2012). Women at war: Understanding how women veterans cope with combat and military sexual trauma. *Social Science & Medicine, 74*(4), 537–45. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2011.10.039>
- National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics.** (2017). Women veterans report: The past, present, and future of women veterans. Department of Veterans Affairs. [https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/specialreports/women\\_veterans\\_2015\\_final.pdf](https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/specialreports/women_veterans_2015_final.pdf)
- Pennebaker, J. W.** (1997). Writing as therapeutic process. *Psychological Science, 8*(3), 162–166. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.1997.tb00403.x>
- Sayer, N. A., Orazem, R. J., Noorbaloochi, S., Gravely, A., Frazier, P., Carlson, K. F., Schnurr, P. P., & Oleson, H.** (2015). Iraq and Afghanistan War veterans with reintegration problems: Differences by Veterans Affairs healthcare user status. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health, 42*(4), 493–503. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-014-0564-2>
- Smith, A.** (2018). “My understanding ... has literally changed”: Addressing the military-civilian gap with an academic-community engagement project. *Journal of Veterans Studies, 3*(1), 1. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.1>
- Smith, M. J., & Liehr, P.** (2005). Story theory: Advanced nursing practice scholarship. *Holistic Nursing Practice, 19*(6), 272–76. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1097/00004650-200511000-00008>
- Stockdale, C. L., Huffman, J. A., Crawford, E., & Burgess, W.** (2019). Engaging student veterans in meaningful service-learning experiences: A practical Guide. *Journal of Veterans Studies, 4*(2), 278. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v4i2.92>
- Strong, J. D.** (2018). Female veterans: Navigating two identities. *Clinical Social Work Journal, 46*(2), 92–99. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-017-0636-3>
- The Postsecondary National Policy Institute.** (2019). Veterans in higher education. <https://pnpi.org/veterans-in-higher-education/>
- Thomas, K. H., Haring, E. L., McDaniel, J., Fletcher, K. L., & Albright, D. L.** (2017). Belonging and support: Women veterans' perceptions of Veteran Service Organizations. *Journal of Veterans Studies, 2*(2), 2. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.12>
- Usbeck, F.** (2018). Writing yourself home: US veterans, creative writing, and social activism. *European Journal of American Studies, 13*(2). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.12567>
- Valentino, M. J.** (2012). Serving those who have served: Preparing for student veterans in our writing programs, classes and

writing centers. *Journal of the Council of Writing Program Administrators*, 36(1), 164–78.

**White House Office of the Press Secretary.** (2015, December 3). *Statement by the President on women in the US military*. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/12/03/statement-president-women-us-military>

**Wilkes, L.** (2017). Framing a veterans syllabus statement for faculty members. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 2(1), 113–116. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.32>

**Wright, G.** (2018). “I’m a soldier, not a gender”: Iraq War literature and the double bind of being a woman in combat. *Women’s Studies*, 47(6), 657–72. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2018.1492406>

---

#### TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Buckley, M. (2021). Empowering Female [Student] Veterans through Community Writing and Experiential Learning in the Classroom. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 7(2), pp. 44–59. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v7i2.268>

Submitted: 21 May 2021   Accepted: 17 June 2021   Published: 27 July 2021

#### COPYRIGHT:

© 2021 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

*Journal of Veterans Studies* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by VT Publishing.