



# Odysseus Goes to University—the Veteran to Scholar Boot Camp

## PROGRAM PROFILE

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## ABSTRACT

Since 2015, the National Endowment of Humanities' Standing Together: Dialogues on the Experience of War initiative has funded projects that facilitate conversation about war experience among veterans and between them and civilians. In this program profile, we document how two awards from this initiative facilitated the creation of a localized and successful humanities-based transition program for student veterans. At East Carolina University (ECU), Veteran to Scholar Boot Camp facilitates discussions about the experiences of war and homecomings in a comfortable setting that prepares participants for the challenge and rigor of university life. Specifically, we provide an overview of the typical struggles that characterize this population's entry into higher education and then explain how this program intervenes to promote student veteran success.

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## ODYSSEUS GOES TO UNIVERSITY

In his 2013 address to the US Air Force Academy, Ben Fountain (2013), author of the Iraq War-centered novel *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, noted the similar plights of American veterans who struggle to return home and characters in Homer's *The Odyssey* (p. 11). He pointed out that the unrecognizability of the ancient combat veteran from his decades-long quest to return home speaks to the protracted homecomings of contemporary warfighters. Similarly, clinical psychiatrist and Classicist Jonathan Shay's *Odysseus in America* (2002) interpreted *The Odyssey* as a "detailed allegory of many a real veteran's homecoming" (p. 2). The struggles of homecoming discussed by these thinkers often extend to veterans applying their GI benefits in pursuit of higher education. At East Carolina University (ECU), many student veterans struggle to make the transition from military culture to university culture, due to the stark differences between the two. Their nontraditional status further amplifies feelings of isolation. Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), Posttraumatic Stress (PTS), and other invisible wounds can transform the personality and demeanors of veterans and complicate their own odysseys back to family and civilian life. These injuries and other disabilities can further alienate this population from university life (Flink, 2017, p. 1; see also Dickstein, et al., 2010; Kirchner, 2015). New student veterans may earn lower grades in their first semester, particularly if older than typical 18–20-year-old students, if they do not "wash out" (Lyon, 2019).<sup>1</sup> They often have families and/or are still active reserves or active duty, which can leave them little time to explore student resources on campus or join student organizations.

However, student veterans tend to outperform traditional students throughout the rest of their academic careers (Lyon, 2019). Yet, without intervention, that initial semester can make a significant negative impact on their overall grades if not academic future, sense of belonging to a four-year university, and symptoms of anxiety and depression. They leave a military institution that discourages asking questions and is built on "rigid hierarchy, leadership, honor, and team over individual" (Liggins et al., 2018, p. 141) for an academic institution that leaves them in charge of their own schedule. That new freedom and sense of individualism can be unwelcome for a population used to following orders to achieve the bigger picture with a familial team (Dunivin, 1994; Liggins et al., 2018). Moreover, student veterans report that university bureaucracy often appears more byzantine than military bureaucracy.

Leaving an institution in which one knows their place and their specific job responsibilities can also be especially lonely for student veterans. Showing up on the first day of classes can be intimidating for this population, mainly

for older veterans who might feel out of touch with the traditional undergraduate population and may express surprise if not annoyance at rude or immature classroom misbehavior, such as shopping, or otherwise surfing the web. Conversely, some might not yet feel that they deserve to be in a university. Jared Lyon (2019), founder and CEO of Student Veterans of America, suggested that student veterans have more in common with international students in terms of GPAs and persistence to degree. Unsurprisingly, student veterans tend to be more mature than traditional students, be able to focus on their schoolwork more easily, and "may be more goal-oriented compared to other student populations" (Flink, 2017, p. 6; see also Duroso, 2017; Jones, 2017). When they find a connection to their communities, they are three times more likely to graduate (Lyon, 2019). Regrettably, the initial barriers described above can initially confound this population when they first arrive at a four-year university.

Research is lacking in the area of transition courses for veterans and their success (Mendez, et al., 2018, p. 2). Scholarship has further suggested that student veterans believe that universities are not prepared to assist veterans because they do not understand them (Flink, 2017, p. 7; see also Hitt et al., 2015; Kirchner, 2015). Emerging best practices for student veterans include connecting them to institutional resources, mentoring them with other veterans, veteran-specific programming such as orientations and transition courses, and educating faculty and staff about military culture (Mendez, et al., 2018, p. 2). An introduction to the pillars of university student support, such as veteran services, tutoring services, and disability services, can help them "overcome the challenges of not being understood" (Flink, 2017, p. 7) and be more prepared and likely to communicate with instructors and peers (Osborne, 2014). University transition programs that deploy veteran-specific content and focus on elevating self-confidence can help participants "feel more in control of their transition to campus" (Ghosh & Fouad, 2016, p. 108). Such programs can also take important steps in retaining student veterans through graduation (Ackerman et al., 2009; DeSawal, 2013; O'Herrin, 2011; Vacchi, 2014). They can provide crucial social support by promoting camaraderie among student veterans within a safe environment where they can share their issues and concerns (McMenamin & Kurzynski, 2016, p. 36).

The Warrior-Scholar Project (WSP) is one such pilot program funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities that partners with colleges and universities to offer 1 and 2-week transition programs in humanities (Christopher, 2017); other iterations offer programs in STEM or business and entrepreneurship (Warrior-Scholar Project, n.d.). Universities can apply to host WSP programs via cost-sharing to cover instruction, room and board, parking,

and classroom space. WSP also trains its participants to become mentoring alumni for new cohorts of student veterans. Prestigious institutions across the United States have developed partnerships with this initiative since its inception with Yale University in 2012 (Christopher, 2017). Such collaborations highlight the fact that the experience of returning to the United States (US) from deployment, and then to university, is an odyssey in and of itself.

## **MAKING THE TRANSITION LOCAL: ECU'S VETERAN TO SCHOLAR BOOT CAMP**

While participant testimonies attest to the success of universities who partner with WSP, transition programs may also be developed locally and more organically to respond to the needs of a particular institution's student veteran population. The National Endowment of Humanities' Standing Together: Dialogues on the Experience of War initiative has funded projects that facilitate conversation about war experience among veterans and with civilians. Standing Together stresses the importance of the humanities in working through the experience of war as it seeks to "promote understanding of the military experience and to support returning veterans" (National Endowment for the Humanities [NEH], n.d., para. 1). This invaluable initiative supports programs across the country that seek to connect veterans with civilians to unpack both the universals and intricacies of military life and warfighting.

In this program profile, we document how two awards from this initiative facilitated the creation of a successful, intensive, humanities-based transition program. Now in its sixth year, Veteran to Scholar Boot Camp welcomes new student veterans to campus before the fall semester begins to hold discussions about the experiences of war and homecomings in a comfortable setting that prepares participants for academic success.

East Carolina University's proximity to multiple US military bases in eastern North Carolina makes it an ideal site to help student veterans transition into university life and beyond. The surrounding region hosts Fort Bragg, Camp LeJeune, Seymour Johnson Air Force Base, Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, and the Aviation Logistics Center in Elizabeth City. Consequently, the state has the third largest veteran population in the country (Western Governor's University, 2019). ECU is a regional 4-year university with around 28,000 students that has consistently received recognition for being a "veteran-friendly" campus. In 2019, College Factual recognized ECU as being in the top 15% of "Best Colleges for Veterans" (College Factual, 2019). ECU's Student Veteran Services office (SVS) provides a veteran lounge with a quiet study area, multiple scholarship

opportunities for student veterans, and a Veteran Academic Support Team; ECU is the first university in the state to host a dedicated counselor representing the US Department of Veteran Affairs VetSuccess on Campus. Through its advocacy for student veteran needs, SVS has also attracted private donations that support many of its programs and veteran-specific scholarships. In another example of the university's outreach to veterans, ECU's recent partnership with the National Park Service brings wounded American military veterans and marine archaeologists together to conduct archaeological work on battle sites (see Hanks, et al., 2021). SVS estimates that student veterans comprise around 5% of the total student population. Additionally, ECU's chapter of Student Veterans of America, the Pirate Veterans Organization (PVO) also partners with SVS to create public-facing veteran-centered events, such as the Storm the Stadium fundraiser for scholarships and Veterans Day's Field of Honor display on campus.

In 2015, Boot Camp's Program Director Anna Froula, whose research focuses on veteran stories and representation, became PVO's faculty mentor and sought to create programming that its members found lacking on campus. In 2016 those conversations, as well as consultations with SVS leadership, prompted Froula to apply for a 2-year grant from the NEH. With the award, Veteran to Scholar Boot Camp began serving small groups of incoming student veterans in August 2017.<sup>2</sup> Boot Camp provides unique opportunities to gain comfort in the classroom setting and develop important scholarly skills (such as reflective writing and critical reading and thinking skills, etc.). Through Veteran to Scholar, participants become active engaged students who report lower levels of stress and anxiety and who participate in other veteran programming throughout the year. This engagement is important for both participants as well as the broader university population. The success and engagement of student veterans raise the profile of student veterans on campus for a student population increasingly distanced from 9/11 and its reverberations in the Middle East, as well as the continuing moral injuries associated with the withdrawals from Afghanistan and Iraq.

## **VETERAN TO SCHOLAR BOOT CAMP TEAM AND PARTICIPANTS**

The Veteran to Scholar Boot Camp Team is primarily comprised of five ECU faculty in the English Department and Brody School of Medicine, and one staff member who specializes in military and veteran narratives, military medical humanities, folklore, Neoclassicism and satire, and writing studies. Most are civilians with familial ties to

veterans, but one served in the Navy, and one is a US Army veteran. Two iterations included an expert in American war novels from Towson University, and two others included live online conversations with Ben Fountain. The team further benefits from university support staff, particularly from SVS and student services. For each NEH award cycle, team members completed discussion leader preparation that includes SVS's "Green Zone" training, which educates faculty and staff members about the particular needs and challenges of the student veteran population. Together, the team welcomes participants on the first day of Boot Camp, and then the individual discussion leaders work with the co-directors to facilitate discussion in their areas of specialization over the war texts of their choosing. These visiting instructors further help participants orient their learning practices to different faculty teaching styles.

Participants include men and women from all US military branches of diverse age and ethnicities. At present, the criterion for eligibility is to have completed military boot camp within their specific branches, which means that they are incredibly varied in terms of age, and experience, and whether they have applied their training to their individual Military Operational Specialty (MOS). Some participants are fully retired, some are still deploying, and some are just beginning their military careers. With exception, this range and variety of veteran experience can intimidate younger, less experienced participants, but most end up feeling like they are truly part of their "squads." Participants report that building confidence in themselves and creating a cohort among their squads are two of the most valuable benefits of Boot Camp. Having a supportive Boot Camp team behind them throughout their university careers can be particularly beneficial because most of our participants are also transfer students who enter at the sophomore or junior level.

## METHODS AND OUTCOMES

We designed Boot Camp to host new student veterans on campus for 2 weeks, ending 1 week before the fall semester begins. The week in between allows both participants and the Boot Camp team time to regroup and make final preparations for the start of the fall semester, which often includes sorting out GI Bill paperwork, moving to a new residence, or finalizing a class schedule. The program's vehicle is an introductory humanities course worth three general education credits. This feature serves as an incentive because it allows for a lighter fall schedule during that crucial first term on campus. One further incentive that has benefitted more recent squads is scholarship funds provided by a private donor. When the program is fully in-person, participants enjoy getting to know a virtually empty

campus as they spend 5 hours a day discussing humanities texts organized thematically. The working lunches also give them time to get to know each other. They also attend short orientations to campus support services, including library tours, the writing center, tutoring center, career services, mental health resources, recreational opportunities, and disability support services. The introduction to disability support services destigmatizes mental health issues and stresses the need for student veterans to be proactive about seeking help to accommodate obstacles in their learning, such as test anxiety, which can improve retention.

According to Mendez et al. (2018), best practices for student veterans include connecting them to institutional resources, mentoring them with other veterans, veteran-specific programming such as orientations and transition courses, and educating faculty and staff about military culture (p. 2). Because one of the main goals of Boot Camp is to form a supportive cohort among the participants, each iteration creates a "squad" out of its participants. Moreover, reading about warfare and homecoming in older texts, such as Homer's *Odyssey* or Crane's *Red Badge of Courage*, demonstrates that the experiences and emotions of war are universal. This recognition shows veterans, as Theater of War's Bryan Doerries put it, that veterans "are not alone across time" (as cited in Mason, 2014, para. 52). The intimacy developed through discussion enables them to feel like part of a unit and more supported on campus by the Boot Camp team and beyond. Non-pandemic iterations have also scheduled a kayak trip to allow for more reflection and squad bonding. We further stress the importance of getting involved on campus by urging them to join at least one student club. We find that this deepens their satisfaction of the campus experience.

The program also assists student veterans in dusting off or building their "soft skills" necessary to succeeding at the university and in civilian life. Boot Camp sessions stress communication, particularly with instructors, as well as written, academic communication. Because college-level writing expectations differ from the military's emphasis on succinctness and jargon, we build in writing assignments that help them tease out the ambiguities and complexities of the humanities texts we read. To assist student veterans who might feel adrift without a commanding officer managing their time, the program also stresses time management skills that include setting up tutoring appointments ahead of time and treating their schoolwork as they would their military job. The intensive 5-day-a-week schedule of Boot Camp further emphasizes reading skills that we call the "gut and go" method, which helps participants complete long reading assignments that leave them with specific points to make and questions to ask rather than carefully reading each word. This strategy is not billed as the ideal or a shortcut

to success, so much as it is a practical application of time management and personal prioritization; i.e., sometimes college students will not be able to read everything or complete all assignments as fully as possible. To promote critical reading and thinking, we also discuss how to decode texts, marking them for points of connection to themselves and their expertise, emerging textual themes, and potential discussion questions. These methods in turn help them build confidence in themselves as scholars.

Discussions are organized around themes that have included war, homecoming, gender, satire, folklore, and liminality. Past iterations of the program attest to how reading and analyzing the humanities texts of past wars encourages student veterans to see their military service in context among previous generations of veterans, particularly those who fought just one hundred years ago after the turn of the last century. Participants have described texts like *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Remarque, 1929) as “instantly relatable” in the portrayal of military life, especially in the depictions of individual veterans who serve as part of a team who bond over mundane and intense situations alike. They have also expressed familiarity with the secondary trauma experienced by British women ambulance drivers in *Not So Quiet...Stepdaughters of War* (Smith, 1930). This context of connectedness—the surprising relatability of the First World War and the intimacy with the ongoing ones—can also help contemporary veterans tell their own stories and reframe their military experience in more positive terms within their own narratives, as participants have attested.

Reading novels and short stories, listening to songs, viewing films, and discussing military folklore all work to and help reveal how emotions surrounding war—boredom, rage, camaraderie, grief, elation—are universal to the war experience rather than the result of an individual’s personality traits. Building on this, we discuss the way that, as World War II combat veteran and cultural historian Paul Fussell has characterized in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), World War I’s industrialization of war and slaughter on a mass scale challenged language promoting the glory of war. This discussion is supplemented with photos and other materials collected on a tour of World War I battle sites, memorials, and museums in Belgium. These artifacts complicate the perception of when wars “end”: how warfare lingers in landscape, leftover ordnance, battle scars, invisible wounds, and public remembrance long after the soldiers leave the theater of combat—particularly when unexploded ordnance continues to endanger communities living in former combat zones, as still routinely happens in farm fields from Flanders to Laos.

This line of questioning about the First World War opens discussions about the long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many military and civilian analysts are concerned that,

unlike in past wars, civilians are increasingly distanced from the service members who are charged to protect them, a distance that can have negative impacts on veterans’ re-entry into a society largely ignorant of their experiences and unprepared to meet their needs and advocate on their behalf. Contemporary war texts such as Navy veteran and country artist Sturgill Simpson’s “Sea Stories” and “Call to Arms” serve to introduce what the humanities are and capture many of the sentiments of finding pride in one’s military career even when questioning the mission and/or struggling to make it all the way home. Ben Fountain’s satiric novel *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk* about celebrated combat veterans on leave from Iraq to serve as political props in an NFL halftime show underscores the absurdities that can arise when civilians want to honor military personnel while ignoring the material realities of asymmetrical warfare. The fraught nature of the “thank you for your service” conversation is a recurring discussion in Boot Camp. For two iterations, Boot Camp was fortunate enough to involve Fountain in live conversations with participants.<sup>3</sup> Though Fountain himself is not a veteran, he is always open and honest about discussing the divide between civilian and veteran, as well as the points-of-view of his military friends, whom he sought as part of his research for his narrative, a salient point both squads greatly appreciated.

Discussions of Ernest Hemingway’s short story “Big Two-Hearted River” (1925/1996), concern a recently returned World War I veteran and focus on the recurring theme of liminality and the home front as the protagonist delays his return home with an extended fishing trip. Discussion questions emphasize critical engagement with the relationship between personal and national memories of war, the emotional aftermath of modern war (in contrast to the heroic tradition), and the lingering psychological effects of combat. This text has remained a favorite of Boot Camp participants because of the way it captures the need to delay returning all the way home to family until one has made some kind of peace. It further introduces the notion of turning to nature for reflection, which is the theme of the kayak trip. Faculty also share personal stories about their relevant relatives who have also used nature as part of their own ongoing recovery from war. The cognitive restructuring of traumatic narrative in this story introduces the theme of narrative and identity, which we explore in a conversation on *The Odyssey*, as well as sets up the vexed homecomings of characters in the following World War I texts and in World War II’s quintessential homecoming film *The Best Years of Our Lives* (Wyler, 1946).

Discussions of excerpts from Erich Maria Remarque’s (1929) *All Quiet on the Western Front* with Helen Zinna Smith’s (1930) *Not So Quiet ... Stepdaughters of War* introduce the themes of Moral Injury and PTSD, as we talk

about the complexities of gender in World War I and the liminal status of war workers and combatants home on leave. Recognizing the liminal space of war, we focus the conversation on such unique ethical dilemmas that arise within this complicated place as treating and/or caring for the enemy, and mercy killing on the battlefield, among others. *Not So Quiet* is a lesser-known feminist response to Remarque about upper-class Englishwomen ambulance drivers in France that turns our attention to the traditional role of women in war as those who tend to wounded men. Participants have found these novels to be meaningful and relatable, particularly in their rendering of the difficulties, if not impossibilities, in telling family members about the brutal truths of war. These squad members have also found value in faculty's sharing of their own personal stories about veteran family members' own difficulties in fully communicating their own war experience.

Turning to the second World War, William Wyler's *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) and its status as a model homecoming film further demonstrate the universal obstacles of the return from combat. Wyler's film, which won seven Academy Awards and starred double amputee Harold Russell, provided guidance on restoring the male veteran's masculinity in postwar America. While the reintegration film often relies on formulaic happy endings, *The Best Years of Our Lives'* subtle attention to the complexities of postwar trauma in domestic settings suggest that the film's hopeful ending is more ambiguous than certain. This prompted one participant to liken the return to family as being a piece of a puzzle that had closed the gap where their piece used to fit while they were on deployment. We also include an example of contemporaneous popular advice to women from a 1945 issue of *Ladies' Home Journal*, which deals with the issue of wartime infidelity more frankly than the film. This conversation sets up the discussion of the "Jody" persona in military folklore as described below. We ask questions about the medium of film conveying ideas of war differently than a novel and focus on excavating the film's themes to consider how the veteran characters navigate the transition from their military identity to their peacetime identity by telling their stories. We also consider the genre of homecoming films, which has historically featured women helping men, as it adapts to today's gender-integrated military and how we conceive of homecomings in a war that has redeployed many personnel and retained others through involuntary extensions, such as "stop-loss," which often puts the return in limbo (Froula, 2016; Simon & Warner, 2010). For participants, *The Best Years of Our Lives* pulls the course themes together, especially in how it demonstrates that invisible wounds, e.g., TBI, PTS, and other invisible ailments, have been a feature of warfare all along.

The conversations then focus on the variety of types of traditions and rituals in military folklore, including verbal folklore (such as cadences about "Jody" who betrays military personnel serving overseas by sleeping with their spouses and partners) and turn to material culture and belief practices. We begin with a conversation about how these cadences build camaraderie and how military folklore is occupational folklore, which includes the methods and terminology that are learned on the job. After lighter discussions on military culture, we move to more personal issues, including those of belief surrounding luck and talismans. Participants read Richard Allen Burns' "Where is Jody Now" (2012) and Carol Burke's "The Things They Bring from War" (2012). The "Jody" folklore prepares veterans for life and family being different at home, and the power of positive and negative talismans on deployment. Finally, the discussion moves to other things that are "carried" to and from warfare, such as the responsibility of creating and maintaining a narrative about their experience that has been targeted for an audience that often doesn't understand the military but believes stereotypes of veterans as broken or damaged.

Since 2020, the program has collaborated with ECU's Brody School of Medicine by bringing on Sheena Eagan as a co-director who specializes in military medical ethics and the history of PTSD and its treatments. We turn to the social history of PTSD to explore how concepts of gender deeply influenced understanding of war trauma. Discussions explore how soldiers of World War I's horrific trench warfare were expected to behave according to heteronormative gender-roles, and specifically suppress all fear responses, while they also often witnessed the mutilation and deaths of their friends and comrades. In reading excerpts of Lord Moran's *Anatomy of Courage* (1945), we examine how gendered expectations regarding the social role of men, women and warrior shaped our understanding of PTSD, while contributing to stigma and possibly moral injury. Excerpts from Jonathon Shay's (1994, 2002) work further underscore the importance of understanding moral injury as it relates to PTSD and re-integration. According to The Moral Injury Project (n.d.) at Syracuse University, examples in warfare include:

- Using deadly force in combat and causing the harm or death of civilians, knowingly but without alternatives, or accidentally.
- Giving orders in combat that result in the injury or death of a fellow service member.
- Failing to provide medical aid to an injured civilian or service member.
- Returning home from deployment and hearing of the executions of cooperating local nationals.

- Failing to report knowledge of a sexual assault or rape committed against oneself, a fellow service member, or civilians.
- Following orders that were illegal, immoral, and/or against the Rules of Engagement (ROE) or Geneva Convention.
- A change in belief about the necessity or justification for war, during or after one's service. (n.p.)

Shay's 2002 book, *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*, highlights a need for the prevention of "psychological and moral injury in military service" (p. 6), particularly as we reckon with the fallout from the wars in the Middle East.

These discussions underscore the cultural inability to understand non-physical properties that lead to disease/ill health and how it has led to explanations of these health problems through various socially constructed (and often stigmatizing) narratives. Narratives for World War I and World War II draw from Lord Moran's *The Anatomy of Courage*, first published in 1945. This book has been widely celebrated and read as a "gospel of guidance" (de la Billière, 1945/2007, p. xvii) for military leaders attempting to understand courage and cowardice. As such, it was formative in shaping understandings of PTSD and still provides insight into the explanatory narratives used to make sense of war trauma and better understand the long-standing stigma surrounding treatment. We connect these narratives to examples from other conflicts and seek to understand the inter-related concept of moral injury. Mounting evidence suggests that moral injury may serve as an underlying mechanism for the relationship between post-traumatic stress and suicidal outcomes. Citing Lifton (1973), Ragin (2020) noted that "Scholars of moral injury point to the U.S. war in Vietnam, and to some extent those in Iraq and Afghanistan, as conflicts which left veterans with a sense of 'all-encompassing absurdity and moral inversion'" (p. 146).

These conversations lead us to consider military service's ramifications on the health of veterans. Studies have shown that veterans have unique considerations in the realm of health and healthcare that are not often adequately discussed in medical education. Given the demographics of North Carolina, ECU's health services students are likely to graduate and provide care to a growing veteran population. Beyond that, the current plan to downsize the military medical corps will lead to increased reliance on the civilian sector. Therefore, it is of critical importance that civilian providers are knowledgeable and prepared to address the unique dimensions of health that are associated with military service. Recognizing the value that increased

dialogue between veterans and health care providers, Boot Camp partners with courses offered in the ECU Honors College (ECU HC) and Brody School of Medicine (BSOM), specifically Egan's course on the experience of medicine in war throughout history and a medical student elective on the topic of medicine in war. These interdisciplinary collaborations offer veteran participants the opportunity to act as co-facilitators and thereby build dialogue across our shared community.

Additionally, veterans interested in pursuing a career in medicine or a health-related profession have opportunities to form connections within these fields. Beyond that, the interdisciplinary and humanities-based approach provides critical skills for future health care professionals. Research suggests that medical students who have taken humanities courses, or maintained engagement in these areas, have lower rates of burn out, better mental health, higher emotional intelligence, and better relationships with their patients (when compared to those without experience in the humanities) (Mangione et al., 2018). In this way, our program further expands opportunities with the goal to promote success among veterans in these fields.

## CONCLUSIONS

Boot Camp's emphasis on humanities war texts helps participants reconsider positive and negative elements of their service and deployments and demonstrates that the universal experiences of combat and homecoming—boredom, elation, camaraderie, rage, isolation, detachment—are not personality quirks or defects but the experience of every war. These interventions can work to bridge the gap between civilians and service personnel discussing shared texts from different perspectives. While the program is not intended to be therapeutic, a few members of each squad invariably express that the program has helped them reframe their military experiences in more positive terms. Another reported that *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Remarque, 1929) helped him reevaluate his service more positively as he was still processing a mass casualty event. The program also builds confidence and camaraderie. The vast majority of our participants are not only succeeding and graduating but excelling; some have even move on to graduate school in the pursuit of new civilian careers. We follow up with surveys and interviews as well as casual meetings to check in, both to track their progress and to provide further faculty guidance as appropriate.

We have learned anecdotally that Boot Camp best serves veterans who have put it to practical use and have left behind their high-school study habits. We have

observed that a few of the younger, much less experienced participants did not always reap the full benefits of the program or the university experience. Reflecting what studies routinely suggest is the ideal writing class size, we also have found that fifteen is an ideal number to build camaraderie and trust within a squad. Participants have reported that, consequently, they are approaching their progress toward degree with confidence and new ways of thinking critically. Crucially, they know to ask for help when they need it and to meet with their instructors outside of class to ensure that they are performing to the best of their abilities. They have expressed that the program has made them feel comfortable in the college classroom and that they all would definitely recommend it to other student veterans. We continue to monitor their retention, GPA, satisfaction with their university experience, and progress to graduation.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, Boot Camp moved online in 2020 and 2021, which allowed for further opportunities for participants to learn ECU's electronic course management platforms as well as an unforeseen bonus: for the first time, the program could accommodate student veteran learners who could not have participated in person because they either had entirely online schedules or were on deployment or transitioning back from the Middle East. This allowed, for example, for one student veteran to participate from South Korea and for another to take part while transitioning back from overseas and quarantining stateside. This pandemic silver lining has prompted the directors to plan for a more hybrid format in future iterations in which the face-to-face and online participants can come together for discussions, then engaging the student services orientations either in person or synchronously online. We will continue to seek external funding to support the program and advocate for continued support from ECU as we study it, refine it, and continue to follow our squad members' success.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Lyon's 2019 presentation listed numerous supporting statistics for the claims about veterans in higher education.
- <sup>2</sup> The program name has undergone a few name changes: Soldier to Scholar, Veteran to Scholar, and now Veteran to Scholar Boot Camp.
- <sup>3</sup> For the interview see Froula and Eagan (2022).

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Anna Froula wrote the bulk of the essay, compiled the manuscript, and prepared it for submission. Sheena Eagan wrote the material pertaining to military medical humanities and moral injury. Nicole Kukuchka contributed to the literature review. Sean Morris contributed on *The Odyssey* and satire and war, as well as edited and suggested revisions for the manuscript. Andrea Kitta contributed on military folklore, Zachary Perkinson on narrative, Jonathan Vincent on “Big Two-Hearted River,” and Nicole Messina on Student Veteran Services. All authors have previously planned and led discussions in the Veteran to Scholar Boot Camp.

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