

Student Veterans' Experiences in Negotiating Student Services in Higher Education: A Phenomenological Inquiry

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Introduction

As more veterans enter higher education and institutions utilizing the educational benefits of the GI Bill, more research is needed to determine “best practices” for successful educational outcomes for this population (O’Herrin, 2011).



GI Bill Feedback System

Executive Order 13607 -- *Establishing Principles of Excellence for Educational Institutions Serving Service Members, Veterans, Spouses, and Other Family Members* was signed by President Barack Obama on April 27, 2012 to establish more oversight and accountability in the use of the Post 911 GI Bill (US Department of Veterans Affairs).

The Problem

According to the 2015 report of the Department of Veterans Affairs GI Bill Feedback System, an incongruity exists between delivery of services on campus and the expectations of the GI Bill educational benefits recipients attending these institutions of higher education (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015).

Research Question

What are the experiences of student veterans in negotiating student services in higher education?

Researcher Bias

Researcher has been involved in amnesty and peace movements. For the purposes of this study, the researcher maintains a neutral stance neither advocating nor discouraging military service.

Theoretical Framework

1. Phenomenological inquiry distilling main themes.
2. Personal interviews with participants captured each participant's individual experience to link main ideas (Creswell, 2013).
3. Lens of critical theory based on Habermas' theory of practical communication and interpretation (Bohman, 2015).

Methodology

Participants recruited through purposive sampling email at a county veterans' services center in the southeastern United States. Consenting participants were veterans services officers and were interviewed.

Sites:

1. County Health Department Veterans Office.
2. County Veterans Services Office location.

Participants

- Inclusion Criteria:

- Must be a military veteran.
- Must have enrolled in higher education.

Joe: Mid-fifties, military service, non-combat,
Master's degree, African-American.

Sally: Mid-thirties, military service, non-combat,
Bachelor's degree, Caucasian.

Jen: Mid-twenties, currently enrolled in higher
education sophomore, currently in the military,
non-combat, Caucasian, Female.

Henry: Sixties, drafted into the military, combat

Table 1. Coding Matrix

Main Themes	Main Ideas	Conclusions
Opportunities	Career Advancement Knowledge Acquisition	Better crafting of career services.
Communication	Lack of clarity in communication between military speak and higher education dialog.	Improve clarity in double-loop communications between veterans services and higher education.
Competence	Level of familiarity of faculty and staff in veteran academic services varies and affects outcomes.	Increase training for faculty and staff regarding student veterans and academic services.
Atypical Student	Importance of connection with other veterans and support structures.	Access to Student Veteran Service Centers on campus and consolidation of information for veteran students.

Discussion

Sense of duty

Focus on specific work details

Urgency of speech

Clarity of purpose

Veterans as atypical students.

Limitations

- Number of participants.
- Gender.
- Combat/Non-Combat Roles.

Conclusions

- In negotiating services in higher education, veterans overall experienced an ambiguity not present in military life.
- Ambiguity in communication.
- Lack of structure and specification in higher education.
- Importance of competence and training of academic faculty and staff in veterans and student services in consolidated and accessible format on campus.

Implications

- Directions for future research include peer mentorship models geared toward the special experiences and needs of the veteran student to facilitate delivery of services in higher education.

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