

FROM BOOTS TO BOOKS: APPLYING SCHLOSSBERG'S TRANSITION MODEL TO
THE TRANSITION OF TODAY'S AMERICAN VETERANS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

by

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Abstract

Attending college or university immediately after serving on active duty in the U.S. military can be a challenging transition because the daily roles and responsibilities of active duty service members greatly differ from that of college students. Therefore, the purpose of this report is to provide an accurate portrayal of the experiences and challenges veterans encounter when they leave the armed forces and become students at a college or university. The report is a resource that academic advisors and other student affairs professionals can use to increase their awareness and understanding of veterans' transition experiences from military life to college life. To achieve this goal, the following are included in the report: (a) a theory driven description of veterans' needs and concerns as they transition from military to college, and available resources that can facilitate veterans' transitions; (b) questions advisors should ask themselves and their respective institution regarding how they can better serve this population of students; and (c) three case studies of student-veterans who served at least two, but no more than four, years of active duty in the United States Armed Forces, and who chose to enroll in an institution of higher education shortly after their discharge from the military. The four coping mechanisms, or four S's (Situation, Self, Support, Strategies), of Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995) serve as the organizing framework of the report. Although some articles have touched upon Schlossberg's transition model to the student-veteran transition (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Livingston, 2009), none used the model as a framework to organize the relevant literature.

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Dedication

This report is dedicated to all student veterans at institutions of higher education across the United States. More specifically, current and former members of the 965 AACCS. I remain in awe of your services and sacrifices made on behalf of the country.

CHAPTER 1 – Need for the Report

In the days and years following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 thousands of future veterans began to enlist in America's military to fulfill the need of the impending wars. As of 2010, many of their commitments are ending, because of time served or medical discharge, and thus hundreds of thousands of veterans (375,000 in 2008) are reentering the civilian world each year (McBain, 2008). Additionally, 9 out of every 10 enlisted service members entered the military without a bachelor's degree (McBain, 2008). With the influx to higher education of veterans leaving the military, combined with the recent passing of the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 (commonly referred to as the Post 9/11 GI Bill), which drastically increased educational benefits to veterans, it is natural to assume that many of these former active duty service members will look to higher education as their next endeavor (Weeder & Wax, 2009).

Additionally, the military's desire for a more educated workforce will increase the population of military personnel on campuses across the United States. All branches of the armed services currently offer at least \$4,000 per year for service members to attend college while they are serving on active duty ("Tuition Assistance TA Program Overview," n.d.). These funds exclude the benefits received from the Post 9/11 GI Bill. Finally, given the potential that global conflicts may continue and troop levels will likely swell to meet these challenges, postsecondary institutions should plan for increased numbers of student-veterans on campus (DiRamio et al., 2008). As these veterans return home and begin to enroll in higher education, existing support services can become strained and institutions lacking in proper support may be overwhelmed.

Veterans are also diversifying the type of higher education institution they attend, although the majority of veterans choose public 2 year. In the 2007-2008 school year, 2-year public colleges were attended by 43% of student-veterans, followed by public 4-year schools (21%), private not-for-profit 4 year institutions (14%), and private-for-profit colleges (13%; Radford & Wun, 2009). Although veteran enrollment in 2-year public colleges is exceeding other forms of higher education, the distribution of student-veterans affects a variety of college

campuses and, thus, advisors in every type of college must be aware of this increasing student population.

Unfortunately, higher education has found itself unprepared for this diverse and unique population. Currently, just 22 % of colleges provide veteran specific assistance with the transition to higher education, nearly 50% of colleges do not have an individual trained to assist veterans with transitional issues, 57% do not provide veteran transitional assistance training opportunities to staff and faculty, and less than 37% of all colleges and universities have trained staff to assist veterans with disabilities (Cook, 2009). If military veterans lack proper support and adequate resources, they appear more likely to have unsuccessful academic experiences. Because of the predictable influx of veterans attending college, it is essential that higher education not only be aware of the projected increase, but take a proactive stance and properly plan for these students. Planning begins by student affairs professionals developing an understanding of student-veterans' experiences, and the potential effects on the college experience. It is very important for academic advisors to develop this understanding because they are the student affairs professionals who will likely have contact with the greatest number of student-veterans.

CHAPTER 1 - Coping with the Transition

Available resources to manage the stress of the transition can be the vital factors between a successful transition and one that is ineffective in achieving one's desired goals.

Schlossberg's Transition Model

Schlossberg's Transition Model (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995) posits four factors that affect an individual's capacity to cope with a transition: situation, self, support, strategies. The first factor, situation, describes the circumstances one is encountering during the transition. Self, the next factor, explains how experiences and personal filters impact an individual's transition. The assistance available to cushion a transition depicts support, the third factor. The final factor, strategies, addresses an individual's existing coping strategies to help successfully navigate the transition.

Schlossberg's transition theory has been effectively utilized to understand and assist individuals adjusting to transitions since the publication of the article "A Model for Analyzing Human Adaptation" (Schlossberg, 1981), which evolved into the book *Counseling Adults in Transition* (Schlossberg et al., 1995). The theory has further developed into a framework that illustrates and explains an understanding of the necessary coping mechanisms to make the transitions during adulthood more comprehensible (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Therefore, Schlossberg's Transition theory was chosen to apply to the veterans-to-students transition because it provides an adaptable structure to apply to a lifestyle change of this nature. Although some articles have touched upon Schlossberg's transition model to the student-veteran transition (DiRamio et al., 2009), none used the model as a framework to organize the relevant literature.

The Four S's

Situation

Individuals who served in the armed forces and are making the transition to higher education find themselves in a unique situation. Unlike many of their peers, they have faced unequalled experiences that set them apart as a special population in the college ranks. Whether

one served in combat or not, the responsibilities and experiences attained while serving remain unparalleled to nonveterans. Schlossberg (1995) evaluates situation in terms of the degree of influence from the following factors: (a) trigger (i.e., the factor that initiated the transition), (b) timing (i.e., does the individual judge the timing of the transition to be good or bad), (c) control (i.e., the amount of influence and power one believes they have throughout the transition), (d) duration (i.e., the extent to which one perceives the change brought about by the transition as permanent or temporary), (e) role change (i.e., the degree to which the transition resulted in a change in one's responsibilities, duties, and positions) (f) similar experiences (i.e., the degree to which previous transitions were similar to the current transition), (g) concurrent stress (i.e. other stressors in one's life separate from the transition), and (h) assessment (i.e., the degree to which the individual views the situation positively, negatively, or benign). As each transition will vary between individual student-veterans, advisors need to evaluate the situation of each student-veteran's transition to higher education through the lens of these factors.

The trigger of a military-to-college transition can be anticipated or unanticipated. Most veterans experience anticipated transitions, one where they have understood for a significant duration of time that their enlistment would terminate on a specific date. Therefore, most veterans expect to be discharged on a specific date, and thus those pursuing higher education most likely established the mindset that they will be college students once their enlistment is completed.

On the other hand, the trigger for unanticipated transitions can vary with each veteran's circumstance. Unanticipated transitions (e.g., medical discharge, other than honorable discharge) are more prevalent in recent years and will clearly play an important role as colleges prepare for the increasing wave of student-veterans. For example, as of February 2010, the Department of Defense reported over 16,000 service members wounded in action that did not return to duty within 72 hours while serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. With the increase in educational benefits from the recently congressional approved Post 9/11 GI Bill many of these veterans seek higher education as a viable option. Therefore, assuming that the transition to higher education from the armed forces was anticipated by the student-veteran is not always accurate, because the trigger to initiate the transition is dependent on the specific student-veteran's circumstances. Although veterans experiencing anticipated transitions may be more prepared for higher education because of increased time to plan for the event, veterans

overcoming injuries may have attained greater resilience skills to overcome unforeseen obstacles.

Veterans forced to discharge because of combat injuries may struggle with the timing of the events. It can be traumatic for a 19-year-old soldier to cope with the injuries of war and also learn that s/he will not be able to remain in the military. Injured service members that planned to make the military a career may feel despair and will need an additional level of support, especially if the injured veteran begins college within a short time between being discharged and entering higher education. Injured veterans could face even greater difficulty if they are required to leave the military and never intended to attend higher education, but because of circumstances feel it is their only option.

Veterans discharged because of medical or other unforeseen circumstances, or student-veterans that did not properly assess the magnitude of the transition, may feel an increased lack of control during the transition. “The source of some transitions is internal, a deliberate decision on the part of the individual, whereas the source of others is completely external, and the transition is forced upon the individual by other people or by circumstance” (Schlossberg et al., p. 54). Similar to their non-veteran, student colleagues, some veterans will enter college well prepared to face the transitions. Others may not be well prepared due to an unexpected discharge or simply lack of preparation. It is important for the advisor to be aware of the possible perceived lack of control experienced by a student-veteran. If the student-veteran perceives a lack control over a transition, it may be beneficial to remind him/her that although the transition may be beyond their control, the response remains within their control (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Another tactic to assist veterans throughout the transition may be to remind them that the transition to college is not permanent. Because the duration of the transition influences the level of difficulty assimilating, a change in lifestyle that is viewed as permanent will be regarded differently than a transition perceived as temporary (Schlossberg et al., 1995). A veteran, and his/her accompanying family, may be more understanding of the change in lifestyle (i.e., loss of income and benefits, stressors associated with moving) because the conditions and circumstance they endure during college will include a date of expiration. “A transition that is painful and unpleasant may be more easily borne if the individual is assured that it is of limited duration” (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p. 56). Having an approximate date of graduation may provide comfort and a reminder that the transition is not permanent.

Because the individual's role in the military and college stand in sharp contrast to one another, role change is prevalent during the transition. Some student-veterans may enjoy the change in status because the restrictions (e.g., proper military attire, appearance) and responsibilities (e.g., dire consequences of decisions made and actions taken in combat) of the military are not present in college. Other veterans who felt they meshed well into the military environment and were well respected by their peers may find the role change more difficult. In accordance with this point, Schlossberg (1995) notes, "A given role change can be more or less difficult (and have greater or lesser impact) depending on whether the new role is a loss or a gain, positive or negative, or has explicit norms and expectations for the new incumbent" (p. 56). The veteran's individual perception of his/her new role, and state of regression or progression towards the desired life role, will contribute to the level of difficulty experienced during a transition. For example, a student-veteran that perceives the transition as an improvement of one's life because he or she is becoming educated will more likely view the transition in a positive light. Whereas the student-veteran that feels the transition is a demotion because the responsibilities of college differ from the military will likely judge the transition negatively.

Whether one perceives the transition as a role loss or role gain a level of stress will accompany any transition (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Reminding student-veterans that they already successfully made a similar life transition when they joined the military may provide them comfort and help build their confidence with the transition to higher education. Asking questions such as, "Can you think of a time when you successfully transitioned into a new phase of life" can provoke a discussion and stimulate awareness of their capability to make successful transitions. Often the individual who endured a similar type of transition successfully is more likely to effectively assimilate to a transition of comparable nature (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Joining the military requires service members to conjure up the courage to face the unknown and adapt to life's changes along the way. Although entering the military is not totally congruent with becoming a college student, parallels such as entering a new environment, learning the rules and one's respective roles, and responding to challenges under pressure are all similarities between the two transitions and issues veterans had to confront before.

The veteran who deployed also has experiences and resources to draw from that may assist him/her when entering higher education. When one is deployed the prospect of combat is present, which can disrupt existing relationships and routines, create uncertainty, and constitutes

a major life transition (DiRamio et al., 2008). Even with the increased confidence, veterans may still find that adapting to college was their most difficult transition.

Possessing maturity and previous experience does not guarantee a successful transition. Although their maturity may be heightened, veterans may encounter difficulty navigating the collegiate atmosphere which can spawn concurrent stress. One reason for the increased difficulty is that many college students, staff, and faculty do not have much exposure to recent veterans, and lack knowledge of veterans' issues, especially issues related to combat veterans. Another reason is that although the Post 9/11 GI Bill expanded benefits and eased veterans' financial burdens, bureaucratic, informational, and enrollment hurdles remain a struggle for veterans as they transition into the higher education community (Cook & Kim, 2009). Therefore, a student-veteran's institution will be a factor in the his/her ability to successfully complete the transition. However, there is variability between higher education institutions in preparedness to address these issues, and thus it is important that advisors both understand their institution's level of preparedness, and advocate for increased preparedness as necessary.

An additional stressor exists if the veteran finds it difficult to relate to the general student population. Values such as discipline, respecting authority and the chain of command, minimizing individual expression, and not questioning individuals of higher rank are just some of the principles that are held in high regard in military culture. These values are often discouraged and, at times, are the sources of protest in higher education. The stress of frequent deployments, possible combat (or at least the existing threat), and military culture are concepts foreign to the majority of undergraduate students and may contribute to the stressors a veteran faces throughout the transition. A veteran may soon understand that s/he is in a different environment when questions such as, "have you ever killed anyone" are repeatedly asked, a question many veterans will feel uncomfortable being asked.

Additionally, the call to active duty is a stressor that threatens the possibility of having to leave college and return to the military. Advisors should be aware that veterans who are honorably discharged from the military often have four additional years to serve on inactive reserve. Because the initial contract usually requires the service member to complete an 8 year obligation, 4 years inactive and 4 years active, veterans are usually required to serve an additional 4 years on inactive reserve upon the completion of their 4 years served on active duty. Inactive reserve does not require veterans to return to a military installation to perform military

duties. Rather, veterans are obligated to report their whereabouts to the Department of Defense, as this agency has the ability to call former service members back to active duty if the respective branch deems necessary. Advisors should be aware of the process and policy of a military withdrawal and reinstatement (e.g., tuition refunds), to properly advise the student on resources available when student-veterans have been activated or to simply quell existing concerns.

Lastly, the belief that someone or something is responsible for the transition is also a factor. A veteran's viewpoint regarding the reason for the transition affects his/her assessment of the transition (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Does one believe s/he is entering college because of effective planning or because the student-veteran was dishonorably/medically discharged from the military because of forces beyond his/her control? Although two veterans may experience a similar departure from the military, their assessment of the transition can be dissimilar. For example, two student-veterans who both served 4 years of active duty in the Navy, and then entered a 4 year public institution, may have drastically different perceptions of the transition. The student-veteran who excelled academically in high school will be more prone to view higher education as less threatening than the student-veteran who is a first-generation college student who lacks confidence in his/her academic abilities. "Advisors need to carefully assess the meaning that students attach to changes and to keep in mind that the same events will have different meanings for different students" (Steele & McDonald, 2008. p.158). Additionally, whether the degree to which the veteran perceives the transition as either positive or negative can affect one's ability to persist through graduation.

Self

All students arrive at college with personal experiences that impact their colligate career. However, veterans come to campus with meaningful experiences that their non-veteran classmates did not have to endure, whether it is experiencing world travel under stressful conditions, fulfilling job responsibilities where the implications could have been detrimental, or enduring combat. Schlossberg (1995) highlights two categories of "self": (a) personal and demographic characteristics (e.g., socioeconomic status, age and stage of life, state of health, ethnicity), (b) and psychological resources (e.g., ego development, outlook, commitment and values). Although many specifics of "self" will vary between student-veterans, there are

commonalities among student-veterans that distinguish them from the general student population.

Advisors need to evaluate the personal and demographic characteristics of the veterans they advise. As Kuh (2008) notes, students with two or more of the following characteristics are more likely to drop out of college: being academically underprepared for college, not entering directly after high school, attending part time, being a single parent, being financially independent, caring for children at home, working more than 30 hours per week, or being a first generation college student. Many student-veterans may possess one or more of the characteristics associated with a greater risk of not graduating. For example, most veterans entered the military before attending college, and not directly from high school. To effectively serve student-veterans, advisors must be aware of their unique situation and take the necessary time and preparation to know the agencies and resources available to refer the veteran for assistance. For example, does the school have a student-veteran office or organization that offers transitional support to this population? Additional support methods to be aware of are listed in the strategies section of the report.

Student-veterans are nontraditional students and thus have some additional stressors that are different from many traditional students that can contribute to the transition's difficulty. Relearning study skills and being reacquainted with the classroom routine, an environment some veterans have been absent from for a number of years, may take time. Many veterans that enter college for the first time, and those that have resumed after a delay, find themselves unprepared by the academic load received (DiRamio et al., 2008). Slowly adapting to college by not enrolling in a fulltime course load or enrolling in refresher courses may be necessary.

Since they are older, have more experiences, and faced challenges delivered from the military, it is easy to assume that veterans may be more focused towards their life goals than many of their peers. In a qualitative study, Livingston (2009) concluded that veterans were more focused academically and overall possessed a higher level of maturity because of their military experiences. Veterans may attempt to overcome their absence from academics with maturity, but the increased maturity may create difficulties when surrounded by students with unrelated experiences.

Student-veterans comprise a diverse population. The Institute of Education Sciences at the National Center for Education Statistics (2009) surveyed veterans during the 2007-2008

school year and categorized the percentage of student-veterans as the following: 60% White, 18% Black, 13% Hispanics, 3% Asian, and other as 6%. Because of the diverse population of individuals serving in the U.S. military, veterans are not simply *exposed* to a populous of diverse individuals, but are required to *work side by side* on a daily basis, even under life endangering situations, with individuals from diverse backgrounds. Therefore, the level of integration with diverse individuals, combined with the international population of individuals they interacted with if deployed, may contribute to a higher level of understanding and tolerance of individuals with whom they are culturally different.

This diverse pool also includes a significant percentage of women. Over 1 in every 4 student-veterans is a woman (Radford & Wun, 2009). And unlike the previous generations of combat veterans, many of the veterans returning to college will be women who have experienced a different side of the military than their female predecessors. Although the armed forces prohibits women from direct ground combat, the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan blurred the frontlines of battle, where women had repeated chances to encounter combat operations (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009). As the nature of warfare has changed, so too has the experience women face while serving.

In addition to combat, women face other struggles when they reenter the civilian world. Since women comprise just 14 % of the active duty population (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009), difficulties can arise when they attempt to adapt to an organization that has more women than men. Women serving in the military “feel pressures to act either more feminine, more masculine, or both and some suppress their femininity or engage in more typically male behaviors such as swearing or drinking alcohol” (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009, p.40). Baechtold & De Sawal went on to mention that women who served in the military tend not to define themselves as veterans after they complete their service. Therefore, it is important for advisors to be aware that not everyone that served in the military will intentionally seek other veterans as comfort during the transition. Other options to connect veterans to the civilian population should also be explored.

Since veterans are deploying to hostile regions, the likelihood of experiencing combat increases. Thus, more student-veterans arrive on campus with physical disabilities obtained through war. Because one role of advisors is advocate, they should be aware of how to advocate for students with disabilities by knowing when a student’s rights have been breached. Kennedy and Ishler (2008) recommend advisors to be aware of “what constitutes reasonable

accommodations and be prepared to help these students when accommodation issues arise, both in and out of the classroom” (p. 130). To properly advocate for their students advisors must be aware of the resources available to assist these students that exist on their campuses.

Besides personal characteristics veterans also bring psychological resources to the transition. Those who have served will most likely attest to the argument that working in another field is of no comparison to the unique lifestyle to which a service member is subjected. It is the veteran and these experiences that make the transition special and different from nonveterans. Individuals approach the same transition from different frames of reference (Schlossberg, 1995). Every service member begins his/her military career with basic training, a process of depersonalization of individualization, in which the trainee is often stripped from his/her former self (Herbert, 1998). Throughout one’s time in the military, a service member is taught that s/he is part of an organization, and being different is minimized. Institutions of higher education operate under different values than the military. When college students enter the doors of higher education, they are encouraged to be an individual and discover what makes one different from their peers. When the veteran leaves the structured world to which s/he has become accustomed, the individual is forced to redefine oneself as a civilian (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009).

With the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, an increasing number of veterans are entering classrooms with invisible wounds such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The National Institutes of Health (2009) describes PTSD as feeling stressed and afraid after living through a traumatic event which can cause flashbacks of the event, nightmares, loneliness, sadness, and anger outbursts.

Although the most accurate number of veterans suffering from PTSD may be unknown, as many as 18% of all veterans that participated in Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom suffered, or are currently suffering, from psychological problems such as PTSD (Burnam, Meredith, Tanielian, & Jaycox, 2009). Since female veterans are experiencing combat they are also experiencing combat-related PTSD. In fact, female veterans are more likely to suffer from PTSD than their male colleagues (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009). Additional mental health disorders can ensue for individuals who served overseas in a combat environment. A 2007 survey administered to nearly 300 Marines after the return of a deployment found that 27% reported significant depression, 24% reported alcohol abuse, and 43% reported problems with anger and aggression (Department of Defense Mental Health Advisory Team, 2007).

Veterans may find it difficult to pursue counseling and other support services even though over 57 % of higher education institutions, regardless of the percentage of veterans enrolled, provide counseling to address PTSD (Cook & Kim, 2009), and more than half of the colleges surveyed provide services to assist veterans with special needs. A recent Rand study (2009) noted that veterans are often reluctant to seek mental health treatment because of the following concerns: the problem will be perceived as a sign of weakness, that services provided will have negative career repercussions (especially if the student-veteran is considering rejoining the military or is currently serving in the national guard/reserves), negative side effects associated with prescribed medication, and skepticism regarding the effectiveness of treatment (Burnam et al., 2009). Therefore, it is important for advisors working with veterans to be aware of the high percentage of veterans with PTSD and other mental health difficulties, and know how to effectively connect veterans to available resources. Further, it will best serve the advisor to be aware of veterans' concerns toward seeking proper treatment and be prepared to address them if the conversation arises. However, it is important not to assume all veterans have been diagnosed with PTSD or experienced combat.

Support

The support one receives during a transitional period can be the vital ingredient to success. Support can come in various forms, and Schlossberg (1995) classifies the types of supports as: institutions or communities to whom the individual is involved, network of friends, family units, and intimate relationships. The more support veterans receive the greater the likelihood that they will have a smooth transition to higher education, and successfully matriculate.

In a recent survey of over 700 institutions of varying sizes to discover the current level of preparedness on college campuses in regard to veterans affairs, the report found that only 22% of institutions provided transitional orientation specifically for veterans, and only 4% offered veteran specific orientation (Cook & Kim, 2009). Some institutions, such as South Carolina State University, provided information about financial resources, education benefits, and included groups such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legion, and Disabled Veterans of America at their veteran orientation (Lokken, Pfeffer, McAuley, & Strong, 2009). This is a great way to inform veterans about available resources and help them meet other veterans and feel

included in their new community. If veterans do not receive transitional support from colleges, there is an increased chance they will have greater difficulty with the transition which can negatively affect the retention of student-veterans.

Being admitted to an institution of higher education does not guarantee graduation for many students, including veterans. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, only 6% of veterans deplete all the benefits of their GI Bill, even though 71% of veterans used at least a portion of their benefits (McBain, 2008). This is astonishing considering that GI Bill benefits are provided for a duration of 36 months. Therefore, if a student-veteran is attending school for 9 months of the year, excluding summer, then s/he will receive GI Bill funding for 4 years. Although some veterans earned college credit before transitioning to college, these statistics are a strong indicator that although many veterans pursue higher education after active service, most do not earn a degree. Lack of support for student-veterans may contribute significantly to the degree completion rates of student-veterans. Advisors need to be aware of their school's veteran transitional assistance programs and adjust their levels of support accordingly. Each institution may also find it beneficial to review veteran retention rates on campus to discover the unique needs of their campus.

Veterans leaving the military receive out-processing briefings to assist them with reentry to the civilian world, but often veterans feel the briefing was not sufficient to prepare them for the military to college transition. Although each branch of the armed forces has its own transition program to assist veterans with reentry to the civilian world, the emphasis of the programs is on the transition from military to retirement (DiRamio et al., 2008). The struggles veterans face when adapting to the college environment could be better facilitated with proper support, especially in the initial stages of the transition. If veterans lack someone to assist and mentor them with the transition to college, they may face increased difficulty during the transition and thereafter.

Some student-veterans may find it difficult to connect with their collegiate peers and may seek the support of fellow veterans, as it is natural to seek the company of individuals who share similar experiences and with whom one feels comfortable. In recent interviews of veterans at one college campus, a large number of those interviewed indicated a desire to connect with other veterans on their respective campus as an effective coping strategy (DiRamio et al., 2008). Connecting student-veterans with each other is one type of support that many veterans could find

beneficial in coping with the transition to higher education. A student-veteran group could be an ideal organization to facilitate the process of helping student-veterans integrate to the institution. A student organization can help ease the transition to higher education for student-veterans by providing a supportive environment (Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009). Unfortunately, only 32% of institutions with services for veterans and military personnel have clubs or other organizations for these students (Cook & Kim, 2009). Consequently, the strategy that many veterans would find beneficial is often lacking in today's institutions of higher education.

However, it is important for advisors to be aware that not all veterans desire to remain associated with the military lifestyle. Some student-veterans have no interest in being linked with a student-veteran organization or seeking out veterans during their transition to higher education. Some student-veterans prefer to be integrated into mainstream campus life as much as possible and not be identified as someone that served (Cook & Kim, 2009). Therefore, although connecting with a student-veteran organization can be a good resource, it will not meet the needs of all student-veterans.

For student-veterans who want to be connected with others that have undergone a similar transition, participation in a student-veteran organization could be ideal for connecting with a mentor. A mentor, who is also a student-veteran and experienced the transition from military to higher education, could assist others with the challenges of detaching oneself from the military, adapting to the college environment, and connecting with available resources (DiRamio et al., 2008). A mentor could be the resource a veteran needs most during the transition, someone that can provide feedback, insight, and foresight into the transition, and provide emotional support. Additionally, it would be more beneficial for the interactions between the two veterans to begin well before the incoming student-veteran arrives on campus, as the incoming veteran would have additional time to prepare for the upcoming life change.

As the opportunity to discover a mentor may not exist or be highly advertised, it is valuable for academic advisors to be aware of students who lack this opportunity. Advisors trained to work with the veteran population, and who understand and appreciate their special needs (e.g., procedure to withdrawal, transfer credit from military transcripts, familiarity with the GI Bill and its stipulations, referring student to proper agencies) could be essential to these students (DiRamio et al., 2008). Advisors should know if their school has a student-veterans organization or mentor program and utilize the resource appropriately. Veterans attending

schools without this type of support network may need additional support in this realm of advising.

Support comes first from understanding the characteristics of a special population and being able to empathize with its members. Just like other groups on campus, veterans have a desire to be understood by those on campus. A consistent message voiced by veterans is the desire for faculty to better understand them as a student population experiencing a transition and needs different from the general student population (DiRamio et al., 2008). The recent American Council of Education report found that institutions providing professional development for faculty and staff on the transitional needs of student-veterans is low. Approximately 60% of schools that responded to the survey do not provide training for staff and faculty to better assist veterans with the transition to college (Cook & Kim, 2009). If the faculty and staff are not aware of current student-veterans' concerns and needs, it may be beneficial to ask a student-veteran on campus to present his or her experiences to the staff, or even to the student body. Some institutions offer veteran panels, where student-veterans discuss their experiences and answer questions the public has regarding their service, to increase the awareness of this population of students on campus (Lokken et al., 2009). This could be a strategy to educate faculty, staff, and the general student population, and thus make the transition to higher education more comfortable for student-veterans. Overall, one does not need to be an expert on military affairs but should possess an awareness of this special population.

The level of support received outside of an institution can also greatly influence the transition of veterans to college and their retention rates. Reliable family support can be monumental when an individual enters a period of transition. For many veterans, having family members in close proximity to support them through the transition to higher education is a luxury because many student-veterans attend college near their former duty installation which is often geographically distant from their family of origin and extended family. Thus, the ability to have family support that is close may be lacking and could affect their performance in the classroom. Although not all veterans will be far from their immediate family, simply asking student-veterans if they have traveled home recently may make them feel understood.

Although a number of student-veterans may not live near their family of origin and extended family, others will bring a family of their own to college. The Institute of Education Sciences at the National Center for Education Statistics reported that nearly half of all of student-

veterans (48%) were married (Radford et al., 2009). Although the transition to college can be difficult for nontraditional students with dependents, almost one in every two student-veterans does have a spouse that is a possible support.

In addition to being geographically distant from much of their family, student-veterans also lose much of the support networks they had within the military. Veterans attending college far from their old military installation will lose their comrades in arms, who were service members they could connect with, and who understood their experiences and adventures. Some student-veterans in this situation will leave the support of other veterans that literally helped them survive combat. The loss of the friends from a residential move can increase transitional difficulties (Schlossberg et al., 1995). The camaraderie lost will be impossible to be replaced by non-veteran students, as non-veteran friends will have difficulty relating to most veterans on various levels.

The transition can be further complicated for student-veterans, who decide to attend college after being discharged from the military because of injuries suffered in combat. To successfully complete the transition, these veterans may need additional support services to readjust. Unfortunately, less than 37% of institutions surveyed, regardless of veteran enrollment, have staff trained to deal specifically with veterans with disabilities, although many of the institutions are planning to make this a higher priority in the upcoming five years (Cook & Kim, 2009). It would be helpful for advisors to be aware of the statistics mentioned and the possible expansion of these programs at their respective institution if applicable.

Additionally, the campus climate, either good or bad, can dictate the level of comfort students feel as they persist in their studies. Unfortunately, higher education has not always treated student-veterans well. Throughout the Vietnam War veterans would often not find it in their best interest to disclose their status as a veteran and opt to blend in with the student population (Summerlot et al., 2009). Although the climate at many colleges, and the nation itself, could be described as different from a generation ago, staff and faculty that work with military personnel may find it beneficial to reflect on the atmosphere of their campus towards student-veterans. In a supportive environment, veterans are less likely to feel the need to hide their military affiliation (Summerlot et al., 2009). Even in the most supportive environment veterans may desire not to disclose their military background for fear of being stereotyped as someone

that is “pro war.” Other veterans may refuse to discuss this portion of their history because it is too painful or they believe that non-veterans will not understand their situation.

If a veteran does decide to reveal his/her military history, many of the veteran’s peers could benefit from the information provided. Students, with a lack of understanding of the current conflicts, could develop better understanding from the insight of a veteran with first hand experiences of the situation, as long as the veteran desires to share and does not feel pressured to disclose. As the level of support will vary between institutions, it may be best to simply send an electronic survey to the student-veterans on campus for their opinions of their campus climate in this regard and their desire to share their stories with their classmates.

Strategies

Strategies refers to each individual’s ability to recognize and modify his/her effective coping responses and processes, and further involves what advisors can do to help students develop techniques to facilitate their progress (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Although the coping mechanisms and strategies to complete a successful transition will vary between student-veterans, higher education is in a position to assist by providing and promoting resources for veterans throughout the transition. As it is the responsibility of the individual to employ the necessary strategies for success, advisors will need to understand the individual to provide proper guidance and applicable referrals. “If you can identify the level at which this person operates, you may better tailor your interventions” (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p. 63).

Advisors also need to understand the resources available at their institution that can help veterans better manage the transition and should ask themselves, and their respective institution, how they can better serve this population of students. The following are questions that will help advisors become more aware of the resources available to veterans on their individual campus and also discover if additional resources are necessary. Does the institution have:

- Priority registration for veterans?
- A simplified application process for readmission?
- Flexible enrollment deadlines?
- Course schedule adapted for transitioning active duty service members?
- Academic counseling services targeted to veterans?
- A webpage for returning/newly admitted veterans?

- A veterans' office? If yes, have you taken the time to become familiar with the resources it provides?
- Veterans Upward Bound, which allows veterans to take college preparation courses without using the GI Bill as long as both parents do not have a 3 year degree, and they are living in the poverty level?
- Scholarship opportunities available to veterans?
- A committee comprised of veterans charged to voice concerns for the population necessary at your institution?

Furthermore, do you know the most effective way to advocate for services if your institution is in need of a student-veteran service?

Each individual college or university must thoroughly evaluate the needs of student-veterans, and the institution's ability to successfully facilitate their transition to higher education. "A college or university may find that very little additional support is required beyond the services already in place, but they may also find that faculty or staff need to develop some additional procedures to be of help to students" (McBain, 2008, p.7). Effectively instituting strategies that will help veterans make the transition to higher education smoother is what veterans need, expect, and deserve.

Other than campus resources, there exists another strategy that can be monumental throughout the transition and should not be overlooked: listening attentively. "In some cases, collective coping, that is, helping people share in a problem that they cannot undo individually is essential" (Schlossberg et al., 1995. p. 72). Simply paying attention to a veteran's story can go a long way to make one feel a sense of belonging. Recognition does not always require someone to be lauded in front of a crowded room. Rather, many veterans will enjoy the appreciation received when an advisor takes the time to hear their personal stories. This can be a great coping mechanism for veterans and assist the advisor by putting life into perspective and connecting student-veterans to appropriate resources.

Additionally, advisors that interact with student-veterans on a frequent basis should have a solid foundation of knowledge regarding the specific aspects of their transition from the military to college. In some cases, it can be beneficial to have an advisor that has served, or have a deep knowledge of military culture, or "know how to speak their language", as some student-veterans may prefer advisors that have served or are serving (i.e., National Guard/Reserves).

Commonalities and shared experiences from an advisor-veteran could contribute to the growth process of the student and a healthy advisor-student relationship, although, having an advisor with prior military service is not a requirement. Some veterans may even prefer to be paired with an advisor who is a non-veteran. Asking student-veterans their preference for an advisor-veteran or advisor who is a non-veteran during the application process could help facilitate this process. Lastly, non-veteran advisors may find veterans, and the veterans resource office if applicable, to be a useful resource when a one has inquires regarding military affairs.

When veterans express concerns to an advisor regarding their ability to perform academically they might simply need reassurance of their abilities. Challenges often arise when entering a new environment that can make one question their ability to achieve. Some veterans, after beginning their studies, will ask themselves if they belong and can survive in the college world. At this point it may be beneficial to review the transferable skills veterans gained in the military that will serve them in college and throughout the transition. Whether one was a radar technician, military police, or infantryman, veterans served in a variety of positions that have helped them to gain numerous transferable skills. Again, although it will vary from veteran to veteran, skills such as teamwork, discipline, dedication, persistence, punctuality, and leadership are common characteristics of individuals who served. Veterans struggling with the transition need to be asked what mechanisms allowed them to persist through difficulties. “We have found that it is usually easier for clients to do more of what they already know than to learn new things” (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p. 100). Although it is important to note that serving successfully in the military does not always transfer to the higher education environment, drawing on skills gained in the military may assist the student-veteran throughout the transition, and therefore it can be beneficial to help them recognize the traits and skills they are more likely to possess than their nonveteran peers.

Chapter 3 – Summary

Military veterans of the post September 11th wars in Iraq and Afghanistan continue to enter higher education in ever increasing numbers. Unfortunately, colleges and universities across the country often find themselves lacking the understanding and services necessary to support the unique needs and experiences of student-veterans. The purpose of this report was to introduce academic advisors and student affairs professionals to some of the strengths, challenges, and needs of student-veterans as they transition from the military to, and matriculate through higher education. The literature addressing student-veteran's needs and experiences, and recommendations for support services in higher education were organized within the four S's of Schlossberg's Transition Model (i.e., Situation, Self, Support, Strategies; Schlossberg, et. al, 1995). This approach to presenting information about student-veterans highlights both the uniqueness of their transition to higher education, and also the commonalities of their transition to higher education with life transitions, in general, and with the life transitions of non-veterans. Hopefully this approach facilitates an understanding of better ways to serve and advocate for student-veterans. When advisors, and other faculty and staff know what resources exist for veterans, indications to be sensitive to, and how to advocate for this population, colleges and institutions across the country can be proactive to assist veterans become successful in their academic endeavors, and hence, future aspirations. Only when a foundation of understanding is present can higher education adequately assist this rapidly expanding population.

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Appendix A - Case Studies

These three case studies depict the transition from the military to higher education. Each represents a veteran making the same transition but experiencing different challenges. Following each case study are a series of questions to facilitate one's ability to apply information of student-veteran experiences and needs when they transition to higher education.

The Case of John

Madeline is a fairly new academic advisor with only three months experience in the profession. Last week Dr. Edwards, a statistics professor at the university, called her to voice his concern over one of his students, John. Madeline is John's advisor. Dr. Edwards informed Madeline that he believes John is struggling to adapt to the college lifestyle. John, as Dr. Edwards described, is a 23 year old, White, U.S. Marine veteran that avoids contact with his peers. The professor assumes that John is having trouble relating to his fellow students in the class because this is his first semester in college since he was discharged from active duty.

When asked how school has been going for him, John informed the professor that he is enjoying the class but, "the students complain too much about ridiculously stupid things." John went on to say, "I even joined a fraternity to see what that was like but realized that it wasn't for me." Further into the conversation John disclosed that he is very proud of his military service and is currently serving in the Army reserves. Dr. Edwards also told Madeline that John is a first generation student from a small town in the Midwest. Since Madeline is new to the university she has not met John, but does have a scheduled appointment with him for the following week.

Questions for the Case of John

1. How can Madeline best prepare for her advising session with John?
2. How can Madeline help John feel more comfortable and less detached from his peers on campus and increase his likelihood of remaining in college?
3. How do John's experiences in the military (deployments, discipline, responsibilities, deferring to authority) influence his ability, for better or worse, to adapt to the campus lifestyle?

4. How can Madeline best support John if he is called to deploy with his reserve unit? How can she assist him when he re-enrolls?
5. How may an advisor that also served in the military work with John (Pros/Cons)?
6. What else may John be struggling with that the professor did not realize?
What other information from situation, self, support, and strategies is relevant?

The Case of Cesar

Cesar is a 24 year old Air Force veteran that finds himself in the presence of his academic advisor, Matt. Married with a 2 year old son, Cesar, who is a Puerto Rican native, misses his parents and siblings greatly but has chosen to attend college near his prior military base because his wife has attained a good paying job there.

This is Cesar's first semester back in school in 6 years and he is apprehensive regarding his lack of study skills since he believes he is "very rusty" in that area of academics. Overall, he believes that he is overwhelmed and underprepared academically for college.

Cesar told Matt that he was very excited and eager to leave the military and begin his studies at the university. Regrets surrounding his decision to leave the military have entered his mind, as the transition to college has been more difficult than anticipated. Cesar also discussed the fact that he has not met any other Puerto Ricans on campus, something that was not a factor on his military base. Matt also gets the impression that Cesar is struggling in his new role, not supporting his family financially. Matt also feels that Cesar's family is not supportive of his choice of college because they wished he returned to Puerto Rico to pursue his studies.

Questions for the Case of Cesar

1. How does Cesar's lack of proximity to his family affect his academics?
2. What role can advisors serve to be more proactive to make students like Cesar more comfortable before they begin to attend classes?
3. How can advisors advocate for their institutions to be proactive to promote campus resources available to veterans?
4. How might Cesar's experiences working with individuals from different ethnic groups in the military affect his transition to college?
5. In general, what should an advisor be listening for that would indicate the veterans might need further support? How would it be different from a student with no prior service?

6. How can one seek out staff/faculty/students interested in veterans affairs?
7. What other information from situation, self, support, and strategies is relevant?

The Case of Jennifer

Fred, an academic advisor, is about to meet Jennifer to coordinate her second semester class schedule. Jennifer, a 21 year old African American and Army veteran, enters his office with a slight limp in her right leg. After looking at Jennifer's academic history, he learns that Jennifer has served in the military and asks her about her service. Jennifer, although resistant to discuss her military experience, does disclose that she was intending to remain in the military and eventually retire, but plans changed when she was wounded in Iraq and forced to be medically discharged. Until her discharge, attending college was not a path she was planning to take. After informing Jennifer that the institution has a student veterans club, she responds hastily, "I don't want anything to do with that. I'm a civilian now."

After the meeting Fred emailed all of Jennifer's professors to obtain additional understanding of her progress. A common theme emerges. Her professors describe her as being estranged from her peers. Jennifer usually sits in the back of the classroom, farthest from the window. She does not speak up in class and one professor even mentioned that Jennifer is easily startled. After consulting a fellow advisor, Fred learns that Jennifer is displaying some symptoms consistent with individuals experiencing PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder).

Questions for the case of Jennifer

1. What emotions might Jennifer be feeling at the time of the appointment?
2. How could an advisor make his/her colleagues aware of services available for veterans suffering from PTSD and other mental health issues?
3. How can advisors assist students to locate available resources specific to veterans on campus, especially when the veteran does not want to be identified as a former service member?
4. How can the advisor advocate to higher administration the need for additional veteran networks, if necessary?
5. How could an advisor in Fred's situation attain a better perspective of Jennifer's situation?
6. Why might Jennifer not want to be associated with the military?

7. What are the best ways an advisor could create awareness to faculty/staff/students?
8. How can advisors best promote student veteran resources available?
9. What other information from situation, self, support, and strategies is relevant?