

# Veterans Helping Veterans: Strategies for Enhancing Student Veterans' Sense of Belonging in Colleges and Universities

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# Presentation Learning Outcomes

- 1) Describe student veterans' sense of belonging in colleges and universities.
- 2.) Describe the factors that influence student veterans' feelings of belonging.
- 3.) Describe specific tools and strategies colleges and universities can use to enhance student veterans' sense of belonging on campus.

# Student Veterans & Sense of Belonging

- Over two million veterans have graduated from higher education institutions since 2009 and over 96% of colleges and universities enroll student veterans in their learning communities (Institute for Veterans and Military Families, 2019).
- However, student veterans are less likely to report a sense of belonging within the campus community as compared to other student populations (Barry et al., 2021).
- This is a significant area of concern because students' sense of belonging is a key indicator of student success, involvement, and retention in colleges and universities (Strayhorn, 2019; Kuh et al., 2010).

# Research Study

Qualitative study examining student veterans' sense of belonging within higher education institutions.

Research Questions:

- 1.) How do student veterans describe their sense of belonging within higher education institutions and what factors influence their beliefs?
- 2.) What strategies can higher education institutions use to enhance student veterans' sense of belonging on campus?

# Sense of Belonging in Military

- All of the student veterans interviewed in this study easily recounted a time in the military when they felt a sense of belonging.
- Four influential factors creating a sense of belonging
  - Bonding through challenge and unpleasant military experiences
  - Feelings of group inclusion
  - Camaraderie
  - Pride in their work as service to the nation

# Sense of Belonging in Higher Education

- When asked to identify a time when they felt a sense of belonging within their higher education institution, most of the student veterans required more reflective time to identify a time where they experienced the feeling of belonging.
- Twenty percent of student veterans were unable to identify a time when they felt a sense of belonging in their higher education institution.

# Factors Influencing a Diminished Sense of Belonging

- Eighty percent of the student veterans interviewed described factors that were influential in the creation of a sense of belonging in their higher education institution
- However, 90% of the student veterans also described their experience within higher education as “lonely,” perceived themselves as “left out” or “stuck out”
- Four factors influencing a diminished sense of belonging were the need for increased
  - Peer support as non-traditional aged students
  - Differentiated instruction as adult learners
  - Campus understanding of the knowledge and skills gained through military service
  - Additional institutional acknowledgement and inclusion efforts

# Need for Peer Support as Non-Traditional Aged Students

Nate, a 37-year-old Marine Corps veteran attending classes at night, commented, ...Part of it is age, because a lot of us are older and some of the other students are young twenties and stuff. And it's a different dynamic. I view the other students almost like little brothers and sisters.

Wendy, a 33-year-old Navy veteran attending day classes, stated, Well, attending college in general, a lot of times as a veteran, you go in and one of the immediate problems that you run into is the age gap that you come in and you might be anywhere from five to, in some cases, 30 years older than the people that you're sitting next to. And it certainly does have a Billy Madison feel, if you will, sometimes. That you try to talk to people and they just can't relate because there is such a huge gap in experience and in an age. But beyond that, there's additional challenges in the sense that you went however long without being in a school environment and trying to step back into that can be difficult.

# Need for Differentiated Instruction as an Adult Learner

Wendy, a 33-year-old Navy veteran attending day classes, stated,

The number-one frustration is being treated like a child. It's like you've got to raise your hand to go to the bathroom. I was like, I'm 33. I can do this on my own. And if I'm paying to be here, trust me, I'm coming back.

Scott, a 34-year-old Marine Corps veteran attending classes during the day, shared,

I guess treat me the same. It's kind of a double-edged sword. I do have more life experience. Well, I'm not going to say more life experience. I have different life experiences than all the cadets do, as long as they're high school graduates coming to school. But as far as the faculty, the faculty doesn't treat me any different. They don't expect anything different from me than they do the [students] which I like, but at the same time you would like to be held to a little bit higher of a standard. But I'm not going to complain about that overly too much. I would probably say that that's probably my top thing, is that we're all treated the same.

Paul, a 24-year-old Marine Corps veteran attending day classes, shared a similar sentiment, I think it's the instructors and it's the treatment of the veteran as an equal for the students. Because at [X] University, we were all treated like children.

# Need for Increased Campus Knowledge of Skills Gained Through Military Service

Scott, a 34-year-old Marine Corps veteran attending college classes during the day, shared, I would probably have to say that a vast majority of schools probably don't understand the experiences that veterans have. There's a large amount of the American population that has served in the military in one capacity or another, but it's difficult to explain those things a lot of times. A lot of the things that you learn through your experiences are intangible and those traits and those characteristics, they're kind of difficult to explain to somebody who hasn't experienced it, right?

Michael, an Air Force veteran in his late twenties attending classes in the evening asserted, I think it's overlooked. I think that, that's something I've come to realize that when I was active duty, I was like, these skills aren't that I guess important, but now coming out, I can see that they are important because it's not just your job training, it's the discipline, the focus, the thinking of others before yourself. And so I think that's a part of it is that, most colleges overlook that it's not just about what jobs you had.

# Need for Increased Institutional Acknowledgement and Inclusion Efforts

David, 30-year-old Navy veteran attending classes during the day, stated,

We're always the last to know any anything going on. And it's funny because all of a sudden the veteran group gets forwarded something that you can tell it's like, oh, this was sent to everybody else a month ago. We're forgotten about. And I think that's because of a visibility issue to where people don't see us a lot. There's a lot of vets that are online, only online and when you don't see that type of person, you don't really think about it.

Nate, a 37- year-old Marine Corps veteran attending classes at night, commented,

I feel a bit like the redheaded stepchild. I'm part of the family, but because I'm a night student and because I work during the day...

# Factors Influencing a Sense of Belonging

Student veterans rated four factors as influential:

- Institutional acknowledgement and inclusion efforts
- Veteran peer support and established veterans' programs
- Engagement with program faculty
- Perception of higher education as a pathway for continued service

# Institutional Acknowledgement and Inclusion Efforts

David, a 30-year-old Navy veteran attending college classes during the daytime, stated,

People have been trying more, they're doing the award ceremonies for the vets. I wasn't able to go to the one...going into things after hours is difficult. But the fact that it still exists is appreciated. So I think that might be why every time I was offered to join an honor society or something like that, I jumped on it and I joined it because I liked that acknowledgement.

Becky, a 40-year-old Navy veteran attending evening college courses, shared,

One of the thing I like about [the institution] is they're always putting information out about veteran activities, or things like that, even though I don't get to participate much. But they're always pointing out and wanting to honor somehow your veteran status. And I find that really comforting in itself. But where I see myself, I guess from a classroom standpoint, I definitely can relate a lot of our topics and stuff back to my time in the military and being a veteran. And it gives me a sense of leadership in my class where people turn to. So, I'm kind of a class leader per se, where people listen and run through ideas and can speak up... They gave me some little award with a little coin, which touched my heart because that's something that they do in the military.

# Veteran Peer Support and Veterans' Program

William, a Marine Corps veteran in his fifties attending day classes, expressed,

The Veteran Student Success Center. I really get a sense of pride that you all are looking out for veterans, and you literally have a special place on campus just for us. I think that's amazing.

Peter, a 30-year-old Air Force veteran attending college classes during the day asserted,

So everyday I walk into that veteran's center, you know that's the place to be. And I hate that so many other veterans don't utilize it 100% because they're missing out. They're missing out on the camaraderie, they're missing out on certain social events, they're missing out on all the resources available... But you're going to see that you don't blend in. It's apparent, but that's okay, because even on campus, you still have these small networks of veterans, happy hour, study hours, the veteran services group. As long as you have something like that, I think that's where I felt my biggest sense of belonging.

David, a 30-year-old Navy veteran attending college classes during the day, highlighted,

So when I went to NatCon I really enjoyed that experience because it just kind of gives you that big picture idea of like I'm a veteran in school, but so are these thousands of other people from across the country. And so it was just such a surreal experience to just feel like I'm a part of this moving forward and I can aid in making or help in making decisions.

# Engagement and Conversations with Faculty Members

Becky, a 40-year-old Navy veteran attending evening college courses, shared,

I'm going to be honest. I don't know if it's my age or the fact that I was a veteran. It might even be a combination. But the faculty just in general are really good of respecting that.

Peter, a 30-year-old Air Force veteran attending daytime college classes asserted,

I also think the belonging, I'm not going to say necessarily in class because you're obviously sticking out. There's no belonging in the class. However, if the professor and the teacher and the faculty can make you feel like you belong, and you're a part of the class, and they include you in everything that you do and they do, it's going to come naturally...But with those two entities, between the professors and the faculty, and obviously the veteran's center, they took care of me and everything I ever needed.

Wendy, a 33-year-old navy veteran enrolled in daytime class offerings, shared,

Maybe talking to the chem professors, because I'm around them the most, and they say hi to me every day.

# Higher Education as Pathway for Continued Service

Scott, a 34-year-old Marine Corps veteran attending college classes during the day, shared,

So I try to make my myself invaluable. It's kind of my goal. That's just the way I've always seen myself. If I'm indispensable, then someone's going to need me somewhere along the road, so that's what I've done. And I've poured myself into what I've done so far at the school. So I think a lot of the faculty primarily have kind of seen it and reacted well. As far as the student body, I don't know that they've really seen everything that goes on behind closed doors and whatnot. But again, I'm not out for glory or anything like that. I'm just trying to make something successful.

Michael, a 28-year-old Air Force veteran attending classes in the evening asserted,

I think it's just that you think of others before yourself. I think that is what it comes down to the major factor for my myself anyways, is the I'm doing something for the greater good of, not just myself but for society or for the community.

Chad, a 32-year-old Army veteran attending day classes, expressed,

I think as a veteran student...I think you have a lot to offer to people. I know before I joined the military, I would like to have talked to maybe someone who has been there, done that. I guess using veteran students more. Cause I feel sometimes I'm just a student. I have a good relationship with my teachers, I don't know if maybe there could be something where if you were in the army or something you could go and I mean, talking to a ROTC class or something, maybe if they had one once a semester or something where they had a day or something where Army veterans, you can come in and say like, Hey, my name is...and you know, I did this, do you have any questions?

# Recommendations from Student Veterans

- Expanding communication and inclusion efforts
- Educating the campus community about the skills and knowledge veterans gain from military service
- Creating more pathways for continued service
- Providing campus transition support

# Expanding Communication and Inclusion Efforts

Paul, a 24-year-old Marine Corps veteran attending classes during the day shared,

Include me in the school-wide events, whether it's a football game, or a... "We're all going to get white T-shirts on and come to the middle of the field and get six feet apart," stuff like that. And making sure that the veterans get those emails, but also that they're mentioned, "You're welcome to this event as well, you're included." Yeah. I guess it would just be the invitation and the recognition of presence.

Scott, a 34-year-old Marine Corps veteran attending classes during the day, shared,

Having veteran get together, we all share very similar experiences. It doesn't have to be limited to just veterans, you can invite [other students] because that's another way to involve them and have them pick our brains and learn from our experiences. But I would definitely say just kind of get together or some sort of thing on campus in the middle of the day, kind of have a cookout or something like that.

# Creating More Pathways for Continued Service

David shared,

I would be happy helping more. Because one of the biggest things that I've told my nephews at least, for high school and middle school about getting involved in things is you get that sense of belonging, join a team, join something, like be a part of it. And we don't really have those opportunities to do things like that. And so it makes it difficult to ever form that sense of belonging. But then this goes back to what are we really here for? It's a weird situation that you kind of have to ask yourself what am I here for? Am I here to make friends or am I here to like do school and go home? So, I don't know. That's a tough situation because push comes to shove if I'm going to have to choose between doing something for my family or supporting the school in some way, I'm going to have to choose my family over that.

Paul also shared a similar sentiment,

For veteran retention. I'd say that getting voices out there and making the veterans feel like they have a presence here or that they're heard. As far as making veterans feel like they're utilized here. I have heard it thrown around, but mentoring, using the veterans in the same way that you use tutors, where you have veterans that could be contacted by the students who want to know more about the military or what you're pursuing a goal in that and you're pursuing experience in that. So, veterans have their own experience and knowledge that they can share too that the students would really benefit from.

# Educating the Campus Community About the Skills and Knowledge Veterans Gain from Military Service

Peter, a 30-year-old Air Force veteran attending day classes, recommended,

Education programs educating people on veterans, not necessarily the stigmatism associated with veterans, but the way they operate in the military.

# Increasing Campus Transition Support

Becky, a 40-year-old Navy veteran attending evening college courses, shared,

I think the acclimation to civilian life, but that's when you first get out and you're trying to acclimate. It's just good to have those courses on communication in the civilian world per se, and leadership in the civilian world.

Nate, a Marine Corps veteran attending classes at night, recommended expanding,

Veteran study groups and peer support programs

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