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Student Veterans Speak Up: A Focus Group Study

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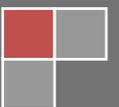


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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Student veterans are very satisfied with Veterans' Services Officers, but displeased with the [Department of Veterans Affairs](#) (VA) because of delays in receiving GI bill benefits. Student veterans tend to be unaware of other student services on campus, such as student counseling and tutoring.

In class, student veterans report conflict between how their instructors portray the military and how they experienced it first-hand. They report irritation toward non-veteran students' disrespectful behavior toward the instructor, and they feel as if the substance of their military experience is downplayed. Finally, they dislike being singled out to speak for all veterans.

Outside of class, student veterans report feeling like they do not fit in because of their older age, greater maturity, more serious attitude towards school, and in some cases, their visible physical disabilities. Nonetheless, student veterans feel well-prepared for college by their military experience which inculcated in them a strong work ethic and a healthy competitive spirit.

In response to these findings, we propose the following recommendations for colleges and universities throughout the United States: First, we recommend that Veterans' Service Offices be adequately staffed to certify student veterans as well as assist them in making the transition to college. Second, we recommend that student counseling centers have mental health professionals with experience treating veterans, and that they coordinate with local VA facilities to ensure that all students who need counseling receive it in a timely fashion. Third, we recommend that new-student orientation sessions be held separately for student veterans so as to address their unique needs and concerns. Fourth, we recommend that academic credit be granted for military experience whenever appropriate. Fifth, we recommend that every campus provide a space designated for student veterans to congregate and support one another. Fifth, we recommend that seminars be offered for faculty to learn more about the specific needs of student veterans and that each academic designate at least one faculty member with special knowledge of student veterans' needs and concerns.

PURPOSE OF FOCUS GROUPS

The purpose of this study was to learn more about student veterans¹ by inviting them to talk about their on-campus experiences in a focus group setting. Previous survey research on student veterans has found that sixty percent of student veterans in the Nevada System of Higher Education (NSHE) feel like they do not fit in on campus, and thirty-six percent feel unfairly judged in the classroom (Elliott, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2012). In addition, nineteen percent of these same students suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, and over one-third are still suffering from physical injuries sustained while in service (Elliott et al., 2012). Focus group research provides the opportunity for participants to speak in their own words about the nature of their experiences, and this particular focus group study was designed to allow student veterans to fill in the gaps that the standardized survey could not address. In so doing, the focus group moderator (the first author to this report) invited student veterans to discuss what it was like for them to be students on the campuses of the [University of Nevada, Reno](#) (UNR), and [Truckee Meadows Community College](#) (TMCC), also in Reno, NV. More specifically, the student veterans were asked about their experience with their on-campus Veterans Services Offices, and whether or not they were aware of, or took advantage of, other on-campus services available for students such as psychological counseling or academic tutoring. In addition, they were asked to describe specific instances in which they felt honored, offended, or uncomfortable, on campus. In the course of the focus groups, the student veterans also had the opportunity to discuss changes that they believed would improve their experiences in college. This report summarizes the findings of this study and makes policy recommendations regarding how institutions of higher education throughout the United States can better serve student veterans.

¹ For sake of simplicity, we will be referring to all participants as veterans; however, 19% of participants were active members of the Reserves or National Guard.

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Five focus groups were conducted in the fall of 2011 with 31 student veterans including 24 UNR students and 7 TMCC students². Each group was planned for eight participants so as to optimize communication among group members (Grudens-Schuck, Allen, & Larson, 2004), though the actual focus groups varied in size from five to seven owing to no-shows. Focus group participants ranged in age from 19 to 46 (mean age = 30) and seventy-one percent were male. They ranged from freshman to graduate students (masters-level), with 25.8% identifying as seniors and 22.6% as juniors. Their class enrollment varied from three to 21 credits (mean number of credits = 12.58).

Nineteen percent of participants were members of the Reserves or National Guard. Most (over 61%) had enrolled in the military before they started college, followed by the remainder who enrolled in college subsequent to joining the military. Fifty-eight percent had participated in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and 41.9% had participated in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan³.

RESULTS

The results of this focus group study are organized around the focus group questions. After presenting each question, we summarize how that question was answered accompanied by illustrative quotes from the focus group participants themselves. We conclude this report with a brief summary of the findings and a list of policy recommendations for colleges and universities to consider in their efforts to support student veterans. Because four of the five focus groups consisted of UNR students, the responses reported here are more representative of UNR students. For clarity, any responses made by TMCC students will be denoted as such.

² TMCC students were more difficult to recruit than their UNR counterparts; therefore, only one of the five focus groups consisted of TMCC students.

³ Detailed information about the methodology of these focus groups is presented in the Appendix to this report.

Part 1: Utilization of Campus Services

Question 1: *Could you talk a little bit about whether you think the Veterans' Services Office is helpful or unhelpful?*

Most student veterans said they felt the Veterans' Service Office on their campus was helpful; however, many felt that the educational benefit and reimbursement process needed to be streamlined. They tended to view the VA as the problem, not the service office at their particular campus, though they did cite a need for more on-campus staff that could certify coursework and deal with student veterans' questions and concerns. Overall, student veterans spoke highly of the staff in the Veterans Service Offices. For example, one student stated:

I've dealt with everybody, including the Veterans Service officer. She is fantastic and I feel bad for her because there is about 1000 students on campus that she has to assist and she is the only approving official. I've also gotten a lot of help from her assistants. It would be nice if they had more answers but I understand when they can't answer more specific questions.

Another student supported this claim by stating:

I've always found her [veterans service officer] to be really helpful. I've had VA payment problems. I know I'm not the only one. She will email me back or call me right away. She has also helped me with scheduling issues when my campus account was placed on hold due to lack of payment from the VA. She is consistently helpful.

A TMCC student described veterans' service office in a similar manner by stating:

She has a pretty good system. I was given a packet and she had highlighted certain items. Anytime I have questions she is really good at responding quickly, especially with email responses. [TMCC]

Another TMCC student indicated how helpful the veterans' service officer had been in processing his paperwork in a limited time frame by stating:

I haven't had any problems. I was worried this semester because she [veterans] service officer] was out of town for a week and I submitted my paperwork right before she left. So, she hadn't been able to certify my paperwork. By the time she got back, it was kind of crunch time. I was in need of money for books and stuff. I emailed her, she got back and everything was worked out within a week. Everything was processed and my check came a week before classes started. [TMCC]

Question 2: *Have you ever tried to use any services on campus (e.g., the health center, student counseling center or the disability resource center) to help you with problems dating back to your military service?*

Very few student veterans reported utilizing services on campus (other than the veterans' services) and many were not aware that there were services available to them. Others reported that if they needed health care, they were more inclined to go to the VA Hospital or the [Reno Vet Center](#), an outpatient facility offering a variety of services and funded by the VA⁴. Several students reported that they did not seek out help (particularly for mental health issues) immediately upon return from deployment, some acknowledging that it took "a couple of years" to reach out for assistance.

Of those who had used campus services (e.g., counseling), reviews of the services received were mixed. Some indicated that counselors were helpful, while others were displeased. One student, in particular, voiced his frustration with having his appointment canceled on short notice without being offered a replacement counselor being available:

Obviously, I was in need – I needed to talk to somebody for support. You just don't break an appointment. You just don't cancel like that. Someone has a problem and they need to talk.

Another student acknowledged the stigma associated with seeking mental health services among military members, indicating that "it takes a lot for us [military members] to seek assistance".

Most of the TMCC student veterans were aware of the [Veterans Upward Bound Program](#) available for tutoring in Math and English and other services, and those who participated in this free program reported that the staff and tutors were extremely helpful. For instance, one TMCC student indicated:

⁴ Several students reported not being aware of the services offered off-campus, like the Reno Vet Center. Information on local veterans' service offices were provided to all students at the end of the focus groups.

The tutoring services are free for two hours per week. There is math drop-in center, as well. You just swipe your current student ID. There is a tutor available if he doesn't have any set appointments. I spent an hour or two with the tutor answering my specific questions. It was a good experience. [TMCC]

Although student veterans had only good things to say about the staff members at their local veterans' service offices, they wished there was a way to streamline the certification process and decrease the amount of time veterans wait for their benefits to be processed. These findings are consistent with data collected from veterans in university settings across the U.S. (Lokken, Pfeffer, McAuley, & Strong, 2009). For example, technical problems by the [Department of Veterans Affairs](#) such as loss of electronic records have resulted in tuition payment delays causing concern that student veterans might be unfairly penalized by having their education disrupted because of this type of mishap (Franko, September 2012). Vacchi (2012) recommends that the final certification process for student veterans should be as late into the semester as possible given that the federal government does not typically release educational payments until well after October 1st. Fortunately, since these focus groups were conducted, UNR has been able to hire an additional certification officer to assist in processing claims for both UNR and TMCC beginning in the fall of 2012.

Part 2: Campus experiences

Question 3: *Have you ever felt that you were treated with honor or respect on campus because of your military status?*

The majority of student veterans did not report feeling honored or respected on campus, although most were not in the habit of revealing their veteran status to others unless they were going to miss class due to a military-related appointment. One participant summed it best by stating:

I don't tell people I was in the military. So, it [feeling honored or respected] doesn't really apply. I just want to stay anonymous [on campus].

Another student did say that he occasionally felt honored on campus:

Maybe at a football game when it's military service night or when they pay tribute to those who have served. They will have some sort of ceremony but other than that not really.

However, one exception to this pattern was a student who wore his uniform on campus:

I've had a great experience at this school. Most of the time, I don't have time to change [my clothes] so I come to campus in uniform. On those days, and the people who know my background, treat me differently than the average person who sees me in my regular clothing. Yeah, UNR as a whole seems to still have that fervor. It's the little things I notice, like holding doors. Being someone who wears a uniform, you'll notice the differences. Because there are times when you look the part and there are times when you don't.

The fact that student veterans tend to prefer anonymity is consistent with research conducted by DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell (2008) who found that student veterans do not appreciate it when faculty ask them to identify themselves in class and act as the 'spokesperson' for all student veterans in the classroom.

Question 4: *Have you ever felt offended by something that happened IN CLASS that related to your military background in the military? Something a teacher or student said?*

A few student veterans reported feeling offended by something that happened or was said in class. These experiences stemmed from (1) differing opinions or ideologies between veterans and non-veterans, (2) perceiving traditional students' behaviors in class as being disrespectful of others, particular faculty and (3) feeling that the importance of their military experiences (when shared with others) was downplayed. For example, some student veterans were offended by non-veteran students' voicing their opinions as facts:

I remember one kid participating in a class discussion about war. He was not a veteran, he was just a kid [traditional student] and saying negative things about deploying soldiers and just being really mean. I didn't say anything because I don't tell anyone I'm a veteran. But it made me feel uncomfortable, like they would treat me differently [if they knew my military status]. I didn't say anything but it really bothered me. I was upset the rest of the day.

Another student described a similar experience:

I was in a creative writing class. Students were expected to write stories (based on the military) but they had no military experience. I'm the same way - I don't tell people I'm a veteran. But when people start making stuff up and they have these wild assumptions, it's the biggest offense.

Other student veterans were also offended by the sense that a political agenda was being pushed onto students by teaching assistants (TA) or faculty:

In general, I would say that liberal ideals are pushed upon the younger students. And, sometimes I just want to be like 'do not listen to this.' I mean you can listen but just don't blindly accept it. I think it's in all classes, not just the core humanity classes.

It is not surprising to find that veterans experience ideological clashes with their instructors given that members of the military tend to be politically conservative (Rohall, Ender & Matthews, 2006) whereas most college instructors identify as liberal or left (Hamilton & Hargens, 1993), especially in the social sciences and the humanities (Harris, 2002). DiRamio, Ackerman & Mitchell (2008) reported the similar finding in their study, with student veterans indicating that faculty did not understand them.

Student veterans cited a number of disrespectful behaviors on the part of non-veteran students such as speaking during class, talking on their cell phones, text messaging, falling asleep in class, or packing up five or 10 minutes before class is over. One student had a problem with non-veteran students' disrespect of authority figures, such as faculty members:

You are taught in boot camp that you are responsible for your peers and your subordinates. So, if you see someone acting up, it's your duty to confront them and to make sure their behavior is corrected because it looks badly on you. So, in class when I see kids [traditional students] come in with a box of pizza and they act like the classroom is their own personal living room. They are texting, talking, on Facebook, etc. I want to jump up and say "no." It's my instinct to say something. Like this is disrespectful to the teacher, this is their job, this is what they do. I see instructors as being authority figures. I have to change my views and hold back. And, I just try to put it out of my mind.

Another student acknowledged how such disrespectful behaviors made it difficult to be in the classroom immediately post-military service, but was trying to cope by adjusting his expectations:

That was my biggest problem with the military. You can't do this, you can't do that! But, that's the thing - we aren't in the military anymore. So, when I see people [traditional

students] act like that, I'm like, I don't care. I'm not trying to tell you how to think. We aren't in the military anymore. And, it's hard getting out of that mindset. We [veterans] see life a different way. But, I can't judge them [traditional students] on that and I expect the same thing. I don't want them to judge me. We pay them [faculty] to be there. So what you [as a student] do in that time of class is completely up to you.

Discipline, professionalism, ceremony and etiquette are crucial elements of the military culture (Kurtz & Turpin, 1999; Reger et al, 2008) that prepare student veterans to behave well in many settings, particularly in a classroom where the faculty members are viewed as authority figures who should be respected. One major difference between the culture of the military versus that of higher education is that the military teaches veterans to refrain from expressing their opinions (Reger et al, 2008) with superiors (e.g., faculty members) whereas in college, thinking critically and challenging authority is encouraged. The military culture may also discourage veterans from expressing anything that might be construed as a sign of weakness, such as asking faculty for help when they are struggling with classwork.

A few student veterans said they were offended when traditional students and faculty did not perceive their military experiences [when shared with others] as anything more than a job. One student said:

There is a big difference in student responses to you depending on your department. My major is criminal justice and my minor is political science. The student body in each of those departments is very different politically. In my criminal justice classes, there is much more interest in my military experiences - because I can apply military stuff to criminal justice. But when I'm in political science classes, it can be tricky. They [traditional students] look at it [my military experience] as just a job and that it's not applicable to other things. So, a lot of times where fellow students are concerned when I have an opinion, it's not regarded as "professional" experience. They [traditional students] see it as just a job and in the most extreme cases, like I was a tool because I had to follow orders that they don't see as legitimate. I think it's just a disconnection - they [traditional students] don't know what it took. In the most extreme cases, they [traditional students] see you as a sheep.

This same student also reported similar experiences with faculty. He said:

In one class, we were talking about something that dealt with perception and terrorism. I think it had to do with them building a mosque a block away from ground zero. There was a huge difference between what three veterans' opinions (including myself) and everyone else in the class. So, I voiced my opinion and they said well what experience

do you have? I told them that I had been deployed in garrison which means I've been deployed here but supporting troops in Iraq. So, I've never been boots on the ground in Iraq or Afghanistan but I've supported them. I told them that and although my job was very relevant to what we were talking about she [the teacher] completely disregarded what I had said. I was then asked "how do you know this." It actually took one of the other veterans who had been deployed in Afghanistan to back me up and make the point. That's just that one instructor and I don't think she's indicative of the entire department.

These accounts suggest that student veterans feel as if their military experiences and background are perceived as having very little worth to members of the university community, such as faculty or their fellow students. These feelings may stem from a lack of understanding of one another's perspectives and background between student veterans and faculty. It is not clear from these data the extent to which the students' perceptions of faculty and student attitudes toward the military are accurate, but it is likely that these perceptions are troubling to the student veterans who have them.

Question 5: *Have you ever felt uncomfortable on campus because of your military experience?*

Many student veterans reported feeling uncomfortable or as if they did not fit in on campus. The most cited reason for this feeling was difference in age and/or maturity level between student veterans and their younger peers (i.e., traditional students). For example, one student veteran shared the following:

It's not just in class but around campus too. I feel different; I don't feel like I belong to the bigger community. I dress differently, I guess, in comparison to the other students. I'm older, I'm 31, I'm not gonna wear certain clothing. It's just different perceptions of decorum, like when they are talking on their cell phones, talking really loudly on the shuttles, and saying stuff they probably shouldn't say out loud. Things like that, just a general disrespect for their surroundings. It's like they aren't aware of what is going on. So, I'm just like, be quiet, no one wants to hear your conversation. I don't know if that's military or just me.

Another student reported:

Student veterans are just more focused. We know why we are here and what we want to do. And, we know what the end result is. Some of these kids [traditional students] are just figuring themselves out. Not necessarily what they want to do later in life, just trying to figure out who they are – and deal with their moral and emotional issues, their

relationships, etc. Yeah, I think that sets us apart from them. We come here with a goal in mind. Get in, get out, move on.

Another example of an experience that made student veterans uncomfortable and that highlights differences between traditional and non-traditional students is the mandatory new student orientation. According to one student veteran:

It was horrible. I had to sit there for the whole two days. Right after I got back from an Iraq deployment. It was like this is how you manage a check book and set your alarm. I was thinking I just want to go classes. I don't want sit in this orientation - a ridiculous ceremony that doesn't help me. I just want to go to class. That's why I'm here. It was miserable, I hated every second.

Another student indicated that she has felt uncomfortable on campus due to her disability. She said:

I have to have special seating. That is kind of uncomfortable sometimes. If some takes the chair or I have to move the chair. This semester tables were set up in one of my classes. I usually sit in the back so I can get up if I have to and not disturb anyone. But for half the class, I'm turned sideways (because we are sitting at a table rather than a desk). I don't know if it's because I'm labeled as disabled and I don't look disabled – but I feel uncomfortable. I don't like to stand out. I've learned to suck up a lot of stuff. That's just one of those things. They [university disability resources] do what they can do.

Although only one participant of this study discussed issues related to having a physical injury, the survey needs assessment that preceded this study found that over half of student veterans sustained physical injury while on duty and many of them were still in some pain, not completely healed, or experiencing limits in their daily activities (Elliott, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2012). Thus, this focus group study likely under-represents the degree to which physical disability may interfere with success in college.

Part 3: Preparing for the Classroom

Question 6: *Is there anything else about being a veteran that affects your experience as a college student?*

Several student veterans indicated that their military background prepared them well for college classes. Student veterans reported that that the military made them be more focused and more competitive – traits that improved their performance in the classroom.

One student veteran said:

What I learned in the military was discipline - a work ethic. It makes you listen and pay more attention in class. I see a lot of students who are doing the homework assignment the night before, whereas I (and I'm assuming a lot of other ex-military) are doing it as soon it is assigned. Just to get it done and move on to what's next.

Another student veteran agreed and added to by stating:

Now, it's completely different. I have a better understanding of how the world works and just the concept of being competitive. I'm maintaining a 3.8 GPA in college. I would have been lucky to have a 2.5 right out of high school. I learned the understanding of what it is to be competitive in the military. It's applicable to college – being competitive (not just with classmates) but with everyone – it's important. I worked in the corporate world a little bit too and that helped drive it home - e.g., my co-worker was an idiot and he had a degree. Why couldn't I do that?

In comparison to their non-veteran counterparts, many student veterans reported having a better understanding of the end result (i.e., obtaining a degree). One student veteran stated:

Some of these kids [non-veteran students] are just figuring themselves out. Not necessarily what they want to do later in life, just trying to figure out who they are - dealing with their moral and emotional issues and their relationships. I think that sets us apart from them. We come here with a goal in mind. Get in, get out, move on.

Like past research, these findings demonstrate how student veterans acknowledge the dissimilarities between them and their fellow, non-veteran students (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). Besides differences in age and maturity, student veterans stress how the military helped them become more disciplined than their traditional counterparts.

Part 4: Interpersonal interactions

Question 7: *If there was anything that you could say to anyone on campus that has NOT been in the military, what would it be?*

Several students reported that they were often singled out by faculty (once they knew of their military background) to speak for veterans in general or that they were called upon to make comments or be used as an example. The majority of student veterans said these in-class experiences made them very uncomfortable and made a bad impression on their non-veteran student counterparts by making them appear to be seeking attention and by highlighting how different they were from other students.

A couple of student veterans (both males) reported feeling stigmatized by others on campus because of their military background. For example, assuming they [student veterans] were “aggressive” and therefore hesitated to approach them. These student veterans stressed the importance of not blindly accepting the negative stereotypes of military servicemen and women portrayed in the media at times.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

This report presents more detailed examples of student veterans’ experiences at UNR and TMCC than were possible to obtain with the standardized survey results (see Elliott, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2012). In line with the NSHE survey results, responses to focus group questions suggest that student veterans are having difficulty adjusting to civilian life, including in their roles as students. One of the most common grievances student veterans voiced about their educational experience was associated with delays in the certification process and distribution of educational benefits. Not surprisingly, unexpected financial burdens can result in an additional stressor in the lives of student veterans who are already facing challenges of a new academic environment.

In addition to financial concerns, student veterans expressed their dissatisfaction with some interpersonal interactions with faculty and non-veteran students. Because student veterans

acknowledged that they differ from traditional students in a multitude of ways (e.g., age, maturity, different political ideologies, disabilities), they expressed a preference for anonymity. Several student veterans expressed their frustration when faculty expected them to speak on behalf of all veterans. Student veterans indicated that certain behaviors (e.g., identifying them in class or requesting their opinions) can alienate them from traditional students and thus can hinder their adjustment to the student role. Additionally, a couple of students indicated that they were questioned and then met with resistance from faculty or traditional students when they shared information about their military experience. These student veterans expressed feeling as if their military experience and background were perceived as having very little worth in the eyes of civilians. Even though very few student veterans cited such experiences, these types of negative interactions made them hesitant to let their guard down in future classes.

Regarding their interactions with non-veteran students, student veterans articulated how they perceived traditional students' behaviors (e.g., texting, logging on social media websites while in class) as disrespectful to the instructor, as well as to other students. Student veterans, however, acknowledged that their military background influenced their perceptions of traditional students. That is, student veterans recognized that military norms and expectations impacted their beliefs about what are 'appropriate' classroom behaviors, and therefore, may be unfairly judging traditional students based on these standards. It is important to note, however, that many student veterans credited military norms and expectations for making them more disciplined and focused students.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

I. **Veterans' Services Offices:** The most commonly cited complaint by student veterans is that their GI-bill tuition and benefits are often delayed, indicating the need to streamline the certification and benefit process. One option for colleges and universities is to be more flexible about tuition payment deadlines for student veterans funded via the VA in anticipation of continuing funding delays. In

addition, many colleges and universities are clearly in need of more staff to meet the needs of the influx of student veterans. UNR was able to increase its staff in the fall of 2012 to add a second certification officer. In addition, UNR was one of 20 institutions nationwide to receive a Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership (VITAL) grant. The VITAL grant funds a VA social worker and an outreach coordinator who work to facilitate students' registration with the local VA hospital as well as educate faculty and staff on issues related to student veterans. Dependent upon the success of the VITAL program it is hoped that the VA will expand it to more and more campuses throughout the country.

II. **Student Counseling Centers:** The subject of PTSD did not come up a lot in the focus group setting perhaps because it is so personal and potentially stigmatizing. However, the state-wide needs assessment found that 19 percent of student veterans in the Nevada system of higher education suffer from PTSD and many more have symptoms but fall short of meeting the criteria for diagnoses (Elliott, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2012). The fact that the student veterans in these focus groups were unaware of the student counseling services on campus suggests a need for more outreach to student veterans who may be suffering in silence. Student counseling centers tend to offer only short-term therapy, underlining the need to continue efforts to help student veterans access their VA health benefits locally. Ideally, student counseling centers should collaborate with local VA health care facilities so as to get veterans started in therapy while they are being registered to become eligible, or waitlisted, to receive VA benefits locally. Colleges and universities should also be working together with local VA centers and hospitals to reduce the stigma associated with seeking mental health care treatment after serving in the military. Research has shown that a primary reason OEF/OIF veterans do not seek care is fear that service utilization will be detrimental to their military careers (Hoge, et al., 2004; Stecker, et al. 2007).

III. **Offering a Veteran-Specific Orientation:** Student veterans acknowledged multiple factors that differentiate them from traditional college and university students. For this reason, student veterans indicated that a half-day orientation specific to student veterans would be extremely helpful. In fact,

student veterans suggested that a veteran-specific orientation be mandatory to ensure attendance.

Because of funding provided by the VITAL grant, the UNR Veterans' Service Office held its first veteran-specific orientations prior to the fall of 2012. As long as funding remains available, the Veterans' Service Office will continue to offer these orientations to incoming student veterans.

IV. **Granting Course Credit for Military Training:** Implementing a policy that would grant academic credit for military training, when appropriate, would formally acknowledge students' military experience. After World War II, colleges and universities implemented such policies (Olson, 1974). In recent years, several U.S. universities with large student veteran populations have implemented similar policies (Field, 2008). Implementing such a policy would likely reduce student veterans' perceptions that their military experiences were perceived to have little value by non-veteran students or faculty. Ideally, colleges and universities should clearly detail how much credit veterans might earn for their military service, and what types of in-service training might translate into academic credit for which specific classes (American Council on Education, 2010; Mangan, 2009).

V. **Designating Space for Veterans:** Many student veterans indicated a desire to have a space on campus where they could congregate much like the graduate student lounge. They suggested the room be equipped with resources such as computers and printers, a vending machine, a whiteboard, bulletin board, and lockers. Students reported that they would use this space to study and to interact with other student veterans, especially since they struggle to connect with traditional, non-veteran students. Research has shown that veterans report high levels of support and low levels of stress from fellow veterans (Laffaye, Cavella, Dresher, & Rosen, 2008). Establishing a brick and mortar location on campus, like a Student Veteran Center, would enable student veterans' opportunity to interact with their peers. Additionally, research on student veterans (DiRamio & Spires, 2009; Lokken, Pfeffer, McAuley, & Strong, 2009) has urged colleges and universities to implement mentoring programs for student veterans which could be facilitated by having a common space.

VI. **Faculty interactions with Student Veterans:** Student veterans frequently report uncomfortable interactions with faculty such as being singled out to speak on behalf of all student veterans or being judged negatively for their military service. Colleges and universities should consider suggesting or even requiring seminars for faculty that increase their awareness of and sensitivity toward student veterans. Results⁵ from a survey of faculty at UNR and TMCC indicate that over 50% of the sample was willing to participate in a seminar on the needs of student veterans. Although slightly more faculty members indicated that they would prefer an in-person seminar, 30% of faculty indicated that they would prefer an online seminar. Regardless of format, the seminar should acquaint faculty members with common issues experienced by student veterans adjusting to college life. Additionally, the seminar should provide faculty members with contact information for on-campus services available to student veterans, such as the Veterans' Service Office and Student Counseling Center. Making resource contact information available to faculty members would better prepare them for interacting with student veterans, as well as assisting student veterans with any needs they may have.

VII. **Designating Faculty Liaisons:** Academic departments should consider designating a faculty mentor or liaison for student veterans and faculty members to contact with questions relating to military norms and issues pertinent to student veterans. Because research suggests that it is important to employ veteran-to-veteran contact (Whikehart, 2010), this faculty member would ideally also be a veteran. Currently, the Executive Director of the Nevada Office of Veterans' Affairs is working in conjunction with UNR faculty and staff to implement the 'Green Zone' initiative. This initiative would bring together a small group of faculty members who would serve their respective departments and student veterans by becoming informed of on- and off-campus services available to student veterans. Members of the Green Zone would play a pivotal role in improving faculty-student relations.

⁵ The report summarizing the results of this survey has not yet been released by the [University Veterans Coalition](#).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, student veterans are a unique student group that brings many assets to university communities, including their vast experience and the skills and habits they learned during their military service. They also have some specific needs as a result of having been in the military that institutions of higher education are in a position to meet. By addressing the needs of student veterans, higher education can serve as a model for the country of how to serve those who have served us. In so doing, higher education can insure that it has done everything in its power to grant student veterans access to the opportunity to succeed in college and beyond.

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APPENDIX: Methodology

- I. **Inclusion Criteria:** The two primary inclusion criteria for this study were that the respondent must have been (1) enrolled as a student at either UNR or TMCC, either part-time or full-time at the time of the study (Fall 2011) and (2) a veteran of the U.S. military or maintain veteran or active duty/reserve status. Additionally, the respondent had to be at least 18 years of age and be able to speak, read and write fluent in English as all group materials and the group discussion were in English.
- II. **Recruitment:** UNR and TMCC student veterans were invited to participate in focus groups. The Veterans' Service Officers at UNR and TMCC played an essential role in recruiting participants by sending email invitations to all student veterans. After obtaining approval from UNR's [Institution Review Board](#) (IRB), student veterans were recruited by (1) email correspondence, (2) in-person contact with the veterans' services staff, and (3) via recruitment flyers posted at the veterans' services office and on-campus bulletin boards. Student veterans were informed that they would receive a \$30 Visa gift card⁶ in an appreciation of their time if they chose to participate in a focus group.
- III. **Focus Group Procedure:** The focus group moderator provided specific ground rules for the focus groups, informed group members that participation was voluntary and that group discussions were being audio-recorded. The moderator facilitated the discussion to ensure that all group members had a chance to participate, calling on other participants when one participant tended to talk more than others. Upon entering the meeting location, the participants were given a nametag and asked to write down a pseudonym and were advised to use the pseudonyms

⁶ Visa gift cards were paid for by a research grant from the [Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues](#) (SPSSI) that was awarded to Marta Elliott, Ph.D. in order to conduct research on issues related to the college experiences of veterans in Nevada.

during the discussion so as to preserve confidentiality. Participants were briefed about the study goals and ground rules of the meeting such as to avoid side talk, avoid interrupting other members, and maintain courteous and non-judgmental behavior toward other participants. Participants were briefed about confidentiality and reminded to respect fellow participants by keeping any information discussed during the focus groups confidential. Additionally, participants were reminded that they may choose not to respond to any questions without penalty but were asked to remain in the focus group from beginning to end, regardless of whether they chose to participate so as to avoid any disruption during the focus group discussion. Participants were provided with the list of focus group questions and instructed to write down their answers. After 10 minutes, these questions were posed to the group. At the completion of the focus group, participants' written responses were collected, and participants were asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire so as to be able to report the sample characteristics of the focus group participants. Participants could refuse to answer any or all of the questions.

IV. Data Analysis: The audio recordings of the focus groups were transcribed using Express Scribe transcription software and a content analysis of the transcripts was performed using Miles and Huberman's (1994) pattern coding technique. Data were grouped into categories based on examples cited by participants and then a matrix was created for each research question, consisting of rows indicating categories and columns indicating participants' responses. The matrix format facilitated a comparison of examples between participants so as to identify common response patterns. Lastly, the categories were merged into the themes presented in the results.

V. Study Limitations: This focus group study was limited by the study size of only 31 participants due to budgetary constraints. Thus it would be inappropriate to generalize these findings to all

student veterans at UNR or TMCC, let alone at all community colleges and universities. The study also under-represents community college students who were more difficult to recruit, perhaps because community colleges are commuter schools (Bailey and Alfonso, 2005; Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004). Future efforts to recruit community college students might include visiting general education courses in-person to distribute flyers and answer questions about the study.

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