



Unlearning As Learning? A Critical Analysis of Student Veteran Support at a Veteran-Friendly Campus

CARRIE CARTER 

JAE HOON LIM 

CLAUDIA INTERIANO-SHIVERDECKER 

JERRY DAHLBERG 

*Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological case study critically examined how cultural conflict between student veterans and faculty/staff influenced the efficacy of strategies for supporting student veterans at a veteran-friendly campus. Through 29 interviews with faculty, student affairs professionals, and student veterans, we analyzed (a) how lack of knowledge about student veterans' military experiences made inclusive and effective student veteran support challenging; (b) how diverging perspectives about higher education as a privilege or earned service, informed by often contrary norms in the military and higher education, led to cultural tension between faculty/staff and student veterans; and (c) how faculty/staff's position as "gatekeepers" and members of the dominant cultural group in higher education led to an ironic and harmful expectation that student veterans unlearn their military cultural dispositions/identity in order to succeed. This study suggests a need for greater military cultural awareness among faculty/staff, continued critical analysis of the culture and power dynamics that student veterans face navigating higher education, and reconceptualization of what it means to be a veteran-friendly college campus.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Carrie Carter

North Carolina State University, US
cecarter2019@gmail.com

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Since 2009, 773,000 US veterans and their family members have used what is considered to be one of the most generous, comprehensive federal education benefits in existence, the Post-9/11 GI Bill (US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2016). Many institutions attempting to attract these students and their profitable educational benefits have claimed to offer “veteran-friendly” campuses, but there is great variety in the type and scope of support offered for these students once enrolled (Cook & Kim, 2009). As the population of student veterans continues to grow, higher education leaders acknowledge that the success of their institutions increasingly relies on the quality and efficacy of their student veteran support. As such, the question of how best to serve student veterans and what it means to be a veteran-friendly campus has become increasingly important for administrators, faculty, and staff implementing support programs and curricular innovations (Vacchi, 2012).

Scholars repeatedly confirm that faculty/staff are some of the most impactful agents in student veterans’ transition into higher education and civilian society (Arminio et al., 2018; Dean et al., 2020), but literature suggests that many student veterans feel misunderstood and often unsupported by their professors (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Vacchi & Berger, 2014; Williams-Klotz & Gansemer-Topf, 2017). Several studies have reported that faculty/staff lack critical awareness about student veterans’ unique cultural background leading to gaps in understanding related to cultural expectations and values (Cook & Kim, 2009; Lim et al., 2018). Literature suggests that while faculty/staff can be key players in student veterans’ success, these underlying cultural differences may function as a barrier to faculty/staff’s intended support.

The goal of this study is to illuminate a cultural and power dynamic between faculty/staff and student veterans. By doing so this study challenges the inclusivity and effectiveness of current practices of student veteran support grounded in the concept of “unlearning” military cultural dispositions and raises a question about whether such strategies—implemented on many college campuses to support student veterans’ cultural transition—are indeed veteran friendly.

LITERATURE REVIEW

STUDENT VETERANS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Over a decade of scholarship examining student veteran outcomes presents mixed results (Demers, 2011; DiRamio et al., 2008; McBain et al., 2012; Sansone & Tucker Segura, 2020). On the one hand, a number of studies have provided evidence that student veterans have strong leadership

skills, time management, high levels of maturity, and a “mission-like” mindset that help them earn degrees and develop fulfilling civilian careers (Lim et al., 2018; Mendez al., 2018; Sansone & Tucker Segura, 2020). On the other hand, many studies report that student veterans face major obstacles throughout their university experience, from navigating institutional policies and procedures related to admissions, to assessing requirements for degree completion upon graduation (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018; Demers, 2011; McBain et al., 2012). Scholars have suggested that some of their challenges stem from the added pressure of juggling employment, school, and family life as adult students (Radford, 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). However student veterans face more than just these adult student challenges.

Existing literature has repeatedly confirmed that student veterans enroll with military values and dispositions that conflict with those normalized in higher education, reflecting differences in these institutions’ cultures: “the collective, mutually shaping patterns of norms, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions that guide the behavior of individuals and groups” (Kuh & Whitt, 1988, pp. 12–13). This cultural conflict in higher education is often unseen and reinforced by faculty/staff as members of the dominant cultural group (DiRamio et al., 2008; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Interiano-Shiverdecker et al., 2019; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). To understand how these underlying cultural dynamics impact the exchange between faculty/staff and student veterans, the current study is grounded in three important theoretical concepts: military culture, the culture of higher education, and cultural capital.

MILITARY CULTURE

Scholars have prescribed the military as a culture with a unique set of established values, norms, philosophies, customs, and traditions (Reger et al., 2008). Despite its multifaceted nature and differences between service branches, scholars agree that, as with any cultural group, the military holds a shared set of belief systems that affect the thinking and behavior of all members (Reger et al., 2008). The socialization process for most service members begins with recruit training, colloquially known as boot camp (Demers, 2011; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). This is an intensive process that often occurs between the ages of 18–20—a critical period of identity formation (Erikson, 1968). Service members are required to learn the “military way” (Demers, 2011) and abide by the mission of the US Department of Defense (2021), “to deter war and ensure our nation’s security” (para. 1). This military dictum requires service members to adopt a collective identity with absolute commitment to comrades, chains of command, and mission accomplishment (Hall, 2011; DiRamio & Jarvis,

2011). These clear and consistent core cultural values shape a diverse group of people in American society that must be understood as distinct from the civilian world (Hall, 2011).

It is important to note, however, that the United States military and veteran population is not a monolith. Given its six service branches, hundreds of military occupational specialties, installation communities across the world; and the diversity of service experiences by rank, combat experience, disability, length of service, service era, race/ethnicity, gender, and LGBTQ+ status, no two veterans' experiences with military culture will be the same. Despite these individual differences, scholars contend that overall, veterans experience a broadly defined collectivist military culture that is distinct from civilian society (Demers, 2011; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011).

CULTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher education is another unique cultural institution in American society, which fosters values and habits of mind that often conflict with military ideology (Moffat, 1991). First, higher education is regarded as the custodian of knowledge and must adhere to "universal standards" that promote its purpose—"to pursue, discover, and disseminate knowledge, truth, and understanding" (Austin, 1991, p. 62). Second, higher education rewards a commitment to autonomy, academic freedom, personal responsibility, and truth seeking (Austin & Gamson, 1983; Hofstede, 2001; Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Wilcox & Ebbs, 1992). Lastly, socialization—the acquisition of values, knowledge, attitudes, and skills appropriate to a particular culture—occurs through a bureaucratic organization where committed members (i.e., faculty, staff, administrators, and upper-level students) teach newcomers (i.e., incoming students) to abide by their expectations (Austin, 1991; Kuh & Whitt, 1988). While students are expected to recognize, receive, and internalize the values of the dominant culture, educational institutions do not necessarily provide them with opportunities to learn that culture (Dumais, 2002).

Previous studies have highlighted how the conflict between the cultural norms and expectations of higher education and the military leave student veterans at times feeling confused, misunderstood, and isolated (Arminio et al., 2015; Howe Jr. & Shpeer, 2019; Interiano-Shiverdecker et al., 2019; Livingston et al., 2011; McAndrew et al., 2019). Military veterans leave a highly structured and respected professional environment built upon the principles of camaraderie and shared leadership (Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008; Lim et al., 2018). In higher education, however, curriculums, services, and organizations are set in place to cultivate autonomy and fulfillment of students' personal goals (Moffat, 1991; Wingate, 2007). Further in

contrast to the explicit communication of expectations in military culture, institutional and faculty expectations regarding standards and desired dispositions are often implicit and indirectly communicated (Howe Jr. & Shpeer, 2019). Deciphering these new cultural norms in higher education is often challenging for student veterans and can impact their success (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Lim et al., 2018; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

CULTURAL CAPITAL

Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital provides a theoretical framework for understanding why students from diverse cultural backgrounds struggle to grasp the underlying values and expectations in higher education that are intuitive and normal to members of the dominant group (i.e., faculty/staff; see Gardner et al., 2007). According to Bourdieu, cultural capital is a resource held only by the dominant group in society transmitted through early socialization or education. In higher education this socialization occurs as new students attempt to decipher what to expect, how to behave, and what it means to fail or succeed (Tierney, 1997). Students who come from different cultural backgrounds are at a distinct disadvantage because they do not simply inherit the vital forms of cultural capital that have been passed down to the offspring of the dominant group (Bok, 2010; Maldonado et al., 2005; Ovink & Veazey, 2011; Tierney, 1999; Winkle-Wagner & McCoy, 2016).

Previous research has brought forth the central and powerful role faculty/staff can play in helping students acquire the institutional cultural capital they need to be successful (e.g., Arminio et al., 2018; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Lim et al., 2018). Interactions with faculty/staff affect underrepresented students' levels of educational attainment based on their professors' and staff members' power to access the culture of higher education (Aguinis et al., 1996). Gardner and colleagues (2007), examined the "habits of mind" perceived by students and faculty members and found that through their activities and attitudes, faculty members create institutional and disciplinary cultures that profoundly impact students. When faculty and staff share some of their control and power with students, self-directed learning, decisions, and progress toward increased academic integrity occur (Humphreys, 2012). Ovink and Veazey (2011) found that minority students are significantly more successful when faculty/staff provide explicit instructions for meeting cultural expectations, such as how to interact with colleagues and professors.

While faculty/staff have an important role in guiding students to academic success, they are also primary agents in upholding the fundamental structure and culture of higher education. As “gatekeepers,” faculty/staff believe they have a responsibility to society to not only produce knowledge, but also ensure its quality by controlling access to it (Austin, 1991; Brint & Karabel, 1989; Reyes, 2011; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Gatekeeping involves identifying a set of desired dispositions and allowing only the individuals who demonstrate competency to advance (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Structures put in place to maintain academic standards, for example, are considered non-negotiable by many faculty/staff in order to ensure objectivity and remain accountable for decisions. However, social and political struggles for access, equity, and inclusion during the Civil Rights movement expanded ideas about faculty/staff’s role beyond the traditional gatekeepers and stewards of academic culture (Long, 2012). Today student affairs practitioners and scholars propose that faculty/staff have a responsibility to support diversity on campus by serving as advocates for students who come from diverse cultural backgrounds. As such, faculty/staff hold a paradoxical role in student veterans’ cultural transition; as gatekeepers and advocates, they are responsible for both reinforcing underlying norms in higher education and aiding student veterans in navigating them.

Informed by the three strands of literature above, this study aims to uncover fundamental cultural assumptions embedded in faculty and staff’s conception of a veteran-friendly campus, and how it clashes with student veterans’ perceptions of support. Our critical analysis is intended to (a) elucidate the privileged cultural power that is inherently part of any social institution, including higher education; and (b) further understand how faculty/staff’s dual role as advocates for students and arbiters of academic/professional standards shapes their philosophies about how best to support student veterans.

METHOD

Our study is a qualitative case study utilizing analytic techniques of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA, a branch of phenomenological research, acknowledges the dialogical process of knowledge construction through inductive, deductive, and abductive analysis; it focuses on individuals’ construction of meanings in a specific sociocultural context (Smith et al., 2022). Due to its special attention given to the situated nature of people’s experiences, IPA conducted in a specific institutional context shares many common threads as a typical qualitative case study of diverse theoretical

traditions. Both methods of qualitative inquiry aim to provide an in-depth and holistic account of the case under investigation (Merriam, 2016); their analytic goal is to understand how people in the given environment make sense of their life experiences. The case, used as the contextual boundary for this study, is an institution of higher education in which university employees and students, as members of the organization, have a shared everyday experience and make sense of their experience within the social and cultural context. Qualitative case study is relevant to our investigation because our goal is to understand how university employees and student veterans define veterans’ successful transition into higher education, and how invisible cultural assumptions and prerogatives of higher education mold the faculty/staff participants’ ideas of desirable support for student veterans on campus.

CASE AND PARTICIPANTS

This study was conducted in a large public university located in the Southeastern region of the United States. Great City University (a pseudonym) is a public urban research institution with approximately 28,000 students and moderate selectivity with an acceptance rate of 80%. The entire student body consists of approximately 60% White, 17% Black, 7% Hispanic, 5% Asian/Pacific Islander, 6% other/unknown, and 5% international students. The institution has a long history supporting veterans transitioning to civilian society. At the time of this study, the number of GI Bill beneficiaries was 650. Partly due to the large number of veterans residing in the region and the institution’s founding purpose to serve World War II veterans, Great City University recently identified supporting student veterans on campus as one of its top priorities. The office of veteran student services was established in 2014 to centralize various types of support for student veterans across campus.

The research team obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board and recruited student veterans and faculty/staff initially through individual or group emails and later by the referrals of initial participants. This research project was part of a formative evaluation funded by an external grant agency that supported student veterans in engineering programs. As a result, student veterans were first recruited within the college of engineering. As a sampling strategy to ensure diversity, non-engineering student veterans were also recruited. All 25 student veterans who volunteered to participate were interviewed. The student participants served in five service branches and were pursuing a variety of degrees in engineering, biology, political science, and business administration (further participant information is located in Table 1 below).

| PSEUDONYM | SEX, RACE | CLASS STANDING (AT TIME OF DATA COLLECTION) | MILITARY BRANCH (YEARS OF SERVICE) | TYPE OF INTERVIEW |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|---|------------------------------------|-------------------|
| <i>Student veteran participants</i> | | | | |
| Saul | Male, White | Senior | Army (4) | Individual |
| Mitchell | Male, White | Senior | Army (4) | Individual |
| Steven | Male, White | Senior | Army (4) | Individual |
| Derek | Male, White | Junior | Air Force (20) | Individual |
| David | Male, White | Junior | Air Force (4) | Individual |
| Paul | Male, White | Sophomore | Navy (10) | Individual |
| Nicholas | Male, White | Senior | Army (5) | Individual, group |
| Robert | Male, Asian | Sophomore | Navy (4) | Group |
| Allan | Male, White | Senior | Marine Corps (4) | Group |
| Justin | Male, White | Senior | Marine Corps (4) | Individual, group |
| Seth | Male, White | Junior | Marine Corps (4) | Group |
| Maxwell | Male, White | Senior | Marine Corps (5) | Individual, group |
| Anton | Male, White | Sophomore | Air Force (6) | Individual, group |
| Jacob | Male, White | Senior | National Guard (5) | Group |
| Dayton | Male, White | Sophomore | Navy (4) | Individual |
| Dean | Male, White | Sophomore | Army (21) | Individual |
| Shaun | Male, White | Junior | Marine Corps (3) | Individual |
| Peter | Male, White | Junior | Navy (6) | Individual |
| Dalton | Male, White | Sophomore | Navy (5) | Individual |
| Jason | Male, White | Senior | Army (20) | Individual, group |
| <i>Faculty/staff participants</i> | | | | |
| Charles | Male, White | Staff | Army (4) | Individual |
| Craig | Male, Black | Faculty | Air Force (20) | Individual |
| Daniel | Male, White | Staff | Army (20) | Individual |
| Ellen | Female, White | Staff | N/A | Individual |
| Paul | Male, White | Faculty | N/A | Individual |
| Alexis | Female, White | Staff | N/A | Individual |
| Dalton | Male, White | Faculty | Army (17) | Individual |
| Herald | Male, Black | Faculty | Air Force (4) | Individual |
| Katherine | Female, White | Staff | N/A | Individual |

Table 1 Participants.

All student veteran participants identified as male and all but one identified as White.

Qualitative case studies rarely seek to create a representative sample or intend to produce generalizable knowledge about an entire population. However it is important to note that the racial/ethnic and gender diversity of our sample was likely influenced by the

intentional recruitment of engineering students at a predominately White institution and does not reflect the student veteran population writ-large. Exploring how myriad intersections of race, class, and gender, among other military service characteristics such as rank, combat experience, and service-connected (dis)ability, manifest in the lives of student veterans is an important

area of future research but is outside the scope of this study.

DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected using semi-structured individual and group interviews. Five of the 25 participants volunteered for interviews twice—individually, then later in a group. After completing their individual interviews, these 5 students also wanted to join one of three focus group interviews. The group interview facilitators found it necessary and beneficial to include them to ensure comfort and collegiality for all student veterans in the group interview process. Each focus group included 2–3 student veterans. The length of interviews, both individual and group, was typically 60 to 90 minutes.

The faculty/staff sample included nine faculty/staff working closely with student veterans. Four faculty members were from two Colleges and had experience working with a sizable number of student veterans. Five staff members were employed in various on-campus offices coordinating or offering services for student veterans. Due to confidentiality, the exact name of their office or job title was not provided. All faculty/staff interviews were individual and lasted 40 to 90 minutes.

All interviews used a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix A & B). A set of open-ended questions were posed to participants to examine their subjective understanding of student veterans' strengths, challenges, coping strategies, and necessary resources/support. Interviews were conducted by one of three research assistants. Student veteran interviews began with a discussion about participants' school-related experiences before Great City University, their overall transition experience on campus and in their degree program, their satisfaction with their degree program, and suggestions for better supporting student veterans on campus. Faculty/staff interviews began with a discussion of participants' work with veteran students, characteristics of veteran students, institutional support provided for veteran students and suggestions for improvement. All interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed verbatim for participant verification and analysis.

The research team consists of five members, each possessing a different cultural, ethnic, and professional background; two had first-hand military experience at the time of data collection and served as the advocates of and communication conduit for all research participants. The research team was led by two faculty members: an Asian American female, the second author of this paper who served as the qualitative evaluator for the grant project, and a White male engineering faculty who worked closely with student veterans. The first author of this paper

is a White female who worked as a research assistant along with the third author, a Honduran Ph.D. student researcher. The first author is now a military spouse engaging in research on student veterans; the third author is an assistant professor in counselor education. The fourth author was an engineering graduate student veteran who served as an advocate and mentor for student veterans. He is now a faculty member in engineering education. We acknowledge that our advocacy stance for student veterans inevitably shaped the entire research process, including our selection of the theoretical framework and subsequent data analysis and interpretations. Still we engaged in constant communication with the student veteran community on campus and shared our observations and interpretations with them to maintain our critical reflexivity and to strengthen the co-constructed nature of our final arguments presented in this paper.

DATA ANALYSIS

Following the general guidelines of IPA (Smith et al., 2022), the research team first carefully read all transcripts, made initial notes, and created a brief participant profile summarizing key information about each participant and relevant context. After an initial review of all transcripts and participant summary profiles, the team noticed some significantly diverging points between faculty/staff and student veterans' perceptions about the nature of major challenges faced by student veterans. We decided to interrogate this initial observation further and probed/coded the cultural assumptions underlying those differed points of view. Considering the collaborative nature of our research, Atlas ti qualitative analysis software was used to ensure consistency and transparency in the coding process. Our data analysis process was iterative and involved multiple revisions of initial code sets and re-analyses of previous transcripts.

In the second stage of data analysis we went back to existing literature to find a meaningful link between our emergent themes and theoretical framework. We found that Bourdieu's (1986) idea of cultural capital would adequately guide our further analysis and interpolated the concept to situate our interpretation of participants' experiences. The research team also utilized various strategies, such as member-checking and peer-debriefing, to ensure the co-constructed and collaborative nature of our knowledge claims.

FINDINGS

We will present three major themes that address the efficacy—or inefficacy—of student veteran support

strategies. First, faculty/staff, as well as student veterans, agreed that a general lack of knowledge about student veterans across the university negatively impacts student veterans' success, but is preventable. Second, faculty/staff and student veterans disagreed about whether higher education should be considered an awarded privilege or an earned service, and as a result, held vastly different perspectives about how students should learn to adapt to the university. Third, despite their concerted effort to help student veterans transition into higher education and civilian society more smoothly, faculty/staff enforced an "unlearning" support model, which student veterans found emotionally tolling and counterproductive to their success.

LACK OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT STUDENT VETERANS' MILITARY EXPERIENCES

Student veterans perceived faculty/staff's lack of awareness about their transitional and cultural challenges both as a major impediment to effective institutional support and as potentially preventable. Both groups expressed a need for faculty/staff and university administrators to be more educated about student veterans' unique needs (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018; McBain et al., 2012). Many faculty/staff admitted to personally being uninformed about aspects of the student veteran experience, such as military culture or veterans' benefits, and cited several reasons for their ignorance about student veterans' unique challenges. Some faculty/staff participants explained that, because students often do not disclose their military identity, they are frequently unaware of whether any student veterans are enrolled in their courses. Other faculty mentioned that they avoid interacting with student veterans because they are afraid of upsetting them. One staff participant described student veterans as "kind of scary ... big dudes with beards. They have loud voices, they kind of come in with this presence and as a faculty member it can be intimidating to be in a room with these guys."

Staff members suggested that because many faculty/staff do not consider student veterans a protected class they are reluctant to provide them with specialized support. As a result, faculty/staff described their colleagues as "inflexible" when responding to student veterans' needs. Unlike many underrepresented student populations, most student veterans were not physically distinct from their peers. As is the case with our sample, the majority of student veterans were young, male, White students who easily blend in with traditional college-aged students at predominantly White institutions or within ethnically homogenous departments (Radford, 2009). For faculty/staff and university administrators, most student veterans were an invisible minority population. Without student veterans revealing

their military background or communicating about their transitional challenges, faculty/staff members could not recognize their veteran status nor acknowledge them as requiring additional educational support. All faculty/staff expressed a need for more professional development and sensitivity training to help them become more familiar with the structure and culture of the military and to help them provide more effective support.

Student veterans repeatedly commented on faculty's lack of knowledge and stated a desire for faculty to "understand what we're going through." Student veterans expressed frustration with faculty who did not acknowledge military-specific academic challenges, such as scheduling conflicts or post-service medical conditions (Vacchi, 2012). Six student veterans felt more consideration should be given to military experience for academic credit and were disappointed by the university's evaluation of their service. In response to inquiries about how service experience is evaluated, "nobody really has any answers," explained Steven (pseudonym), a student veteran who was unable to get credit for over a year of language school he completed while in the military. Aside from awareness of student veterans' existence on campus, faculty/staff and student veterans underscored that university employees lack accurate, working knowledge about military culture and transition, preventing them from anticipating and proactively addressing student veterans' unique challenges. Most importantly, absence of awareness across the institution left student veterans feeling that faculty/staff—student veterans' primary support agents (Vacchi & Berger, 2014)—were unsympathetic and more concerned with upholding institutional standards than helping them succeed.

PERSPECTIVES ON HIGHER EDUCATION: AWARDED PRIVILEGE OR EARNED SERVICE?

Lacking accurate, functional knowledge about student veterans' prior military experience, faculty/staff's narratives reflected certain philosophies and cultural expectations of higher education that student veterans found to be both frustrating and counterproductive to their success. As such, faculty/staff and student veterans held contrasting viewpoints on the approach institutions should take for responding to student veterans' unique challenges. Faculty/staff subscribed to a philosophy of higher education as an awarded privilege, as proposed by a faculty member:

Students pay for the privilege of education. The money they spend is the privilege of sitting in a class so that they can learn things ... It is up to them to dive in and take those opportunities.

Upon being awarded college admission, faculty/staff firmly believed that all students had an “equal opportunity” for degree completion. The difference between success and failure, in faculty/staff’s perspective, was the “hard work” that came with the opportunity to learn. Simply attending the university did not necessarily guarantee that students would earn a degree; faculty/staff believed students were also given certain responsibilities associated with the privilege of education, such as meeting professors’ expectations and abiding by institutional norms which reflected the values of the dominant culture of American higher education. Faculty were firm in their commitment to universal standards and went further to state that the university should not provide any “special privileges” or “short cuts” that might advantage one student population over another. Faculty expressed that students should learn to advocate for themselves when they are struggling. “In order to get help from the professor, you have to do it” explained one faculty member. “You have to reach out to the professor. You have to make yourself known.” Faculty/staff participants frequently declared that nothing would be handed to student veterans; student veterans would have to work hard and learn to adapt.

Student veterans’ perspective clearly diverged from those of faculty and staff; they viewed higher education as a service, one they had already worked hard to earn. Many student veterans explained that their decision to enlist in the military had been primarily motivated by the opportunity to earn GI benefits. As a result student veterans likened public higher education to a business or other paid community services and felt it should be catered to “serve the consumer.” One student veteran summarized, “let me tell you something. I worked my butt off to get my GI bill and now I’m here. I want to learn.” Consequently, student veterans expected the university would offer more specialized support for their needs.

All student veteran participants expressed a need for more specific, direct instruction on meeting institutional requirements and expectations. Student veterans were frustrated by the ambiguous, seemingly subjective guidelines for “how to get things done” provided by faculty and departments. Instead of perceiving the institutions’ universal standards as fair, student veterans felt course prerequisites, minimum grade point averages, deadlines and “weed out” classes were unnecessary hoops to jump through. Student veterans described the decentralized support services on campus as challenging to navigate and repeatedly stated a need for a “one stop shop” where student veterans would know “who’s in charge.” Many participants reminisced over their difficult transition experience and described feeling lost, misunderstood by others, and struggling to maneuver college more

than traditional students (Arminio et al. 2015; Demers, 2011; DiRamio et al., 2008; Livingston et al., 2011). As a result student veterans reported feeling disrespected and neglected by the university’s approach to support. Rather than trying to enforce equal opportunity, student veterans wished faculty/staff would strive for equity by addressing their unique needs and helping them conquer the values and expectations of higher education which they perceived as major barriers to student veterans’ success (Ovink & Veazey, 2011).

UNLEARNING AS LEARNING

Influenced by their position as institutional gatekeepers and invested in the belief that higher education is an awarded privilege, faculty/staff carried out a model for helping student veterans transition into higher education and civilian society which required student veterans to adapt in a way they found distressing, and in many cases, impossible. Faculty/staff explained that certain military dispositions “didn’t fit in the classroom” and believed that helping student veterans “unlearn” these aspects of their previous military identity would help facilitate their personal and professional success. One staff member described the process as “kind of shaking off the parts of the military that don’t fit in quite well and recalibrating a little bit to the academic environment.” Another participant described helping veterans wipe away their previous military identity to become a “clean slate.” By pointing out where student veterans’ behavior did not match the norms of higher education and teaching them to speak and behave “not like a military guy,” faculty/staff believed they were helping student veterans reintegrate back into civilian society as competent professionals.

Faculty/staff repeatedly described coaching student veterans to soften what they perceived as a “blunt” and “abrasive” communication style. One faculty member with military background described holding after class practice sessions to help student veterans present “professionally” in a way that was “approachable” for civilian audiences. While one faculty participant stated that it would be inappropriate and insensitive to expect international students to discard their native language and “learn to speak English” to be successful, he did not apply the same logic to student veterans.

Faculty/staff also believed that student veterans should adapt to the culture of individuality and personal freedom in higher education and learn to accept the often ambiguous, loosely-structured environment. Several faculty participants explained that the culture of ambiguity in higher education is intentionally designed to make students think. “We don’t want to make everything so rigid,” one faculty member elaborated. “We put a premium on higher order thinking,

reflective thinking, flexibility, and adaptability.” For example many of faculty/staff’s expectations came as explicit classroom rules for professional classroom etiquette, such as attending class regularly or avoiding profanity. Other values were implicit and embedded in the culture of higher education, such as the expectation that students would be proactive about seeking help and becoming self-sufficient in developing their own academic plans. Ultimately faculty/staff believed that student veterans who could forget their military dispositions and adopt the values and norms of higher education would be most academically and socially successful (Callahan & Chumney, 2009).

Student veterans found “unlearning” to be both a painful and impractical model for civilian transition. Student veterans described struggling with the perceived expectation to “blend in” with civilians. Many student veterans lamented about feeling like “two different people” when they were with veteran and non-veteran peers. Learning new professional norms was also a challenge for student veterans, who described “turning on and off” their military identity so their demeanor and communication style would be appropriate for civilian audiences. On many occasions, student veterans engaged in self-silencing by avoiding talking with traditional college-aged peers and faculty whom they felt they simply “wouldn’t understand” their military perspective (Hinton, 2020; Howe Jr. & Shpeer, 2019). As a result many student veterans remembered feelings of anger and hostility towards their classmates and faculty members, especially during their first semesters. “I would just yell at people. I would leave. I would disassociate myself with the university,” explained one student veteran. Another student veteran participant, Jason, who spent over 20 years in the service explained that asking him to shut off his military identity was equivalent to asking him to throw away a piece of himself. Rather than caring, student veteran participants found the institution’s expectation for them to unlearn military dispositions as a pre-requisite of their college success exasperating and emotionally taxing (Matias & Zembylas, 2014).

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

This study moves beyond the traditional inquiry of student veteran challenges by exploring the cultural contexts that shaped the lived experiences of both student veterans and faculty/staff. While student veterans face many unique challenges transitioning into higher education, they also hold cultural values and professional dispositions that often directly conflict with those of higher education (Interiano-Shiverdecker et al., 2019; Lim et al., 2018). As a result many

student veterans find it challenging to grasp the underlying norms and expectations in higher education. As members of the dominant group in higher education, professors unknowingly normalize these professional expectations and inadvertently reinforce the cultural barriers that impede underrepresented students’ achievement (Callahan & Chumney, 2009). Student veterans are subsequently held to an ultimatum: adapt to these unperceivable standards or fail.

While previous literature has demonstrated that a lack of military cultural competency across higher education institutions is detrimental to student veteran success (Cook & Kim, 2009; Lim et al., 2018), this study demonstrates how these differences in perspective between faculty/staff and student veterans lead to a culturally insensitive model of support for student veterans that has counterproductive outcomes. Unlike the majority of student veteran research that employs trait-based approaches to understand student veteran challenges, this study centers the cultural power dynamics at play in higher education, highlighting how the cultural norms and expectations familiar to the dominant group (i.e., faculty/staff) are normalized while those of subordinated groups such as student veterans are devalued and dismissed.

Several important implications for faculty/staff working with student veterans in higher education are raised by these insights. First, faculty/staff would benefit from reconsidering student veterans as a cultural minority on campus. This study supports existing literature (Interiano-Shiverdecker et al., 2019; Lim et al., 2018) that conceptualizes student veterans as a unique cultural group with particular values and attitudes carried over from their military experience that influence their perceptions of academia. We, therefore, caution to categorize faculty/staff’s efforts to help student veterans by “unlearning” their previous cultural dispositions as “veteran friendly.”

Student veteran narratives support previous scholars’ recommendations that it is important for incoming student veterans to have specific, explicit training on the cultural expectations of higher education (Lim et al., 2018; Stone, 2017). However requiring student veterans to replace their existing values with those of higher education and reverse intensive boot camp socialization was emotionally taxing for student veterans and reflects cultural insensitivity. An accurate re-conceptualization of student veterans as a cultural group allows faculty and staff members to raise their cultural competence by better understanding military culture, its impact on service member’s identity, and their added challenges during civilian transitions through higher education. Although not all student veterans may feel comfortable doing so, faculty/staff can proactively create a supportive environment affirming their military

identity, openly discuss cultural differences, and ask about the types of support they need to ease transition stress. Understanding student veterans' value systems and cultural dispositions can allow faculty/staff to review their existing programs and services to ensure they are teaching student veterans to integrate their prior military dispositions into their newly emerging student identity.

Having said so we recognize an important limitation, yet poignant interpretation, of our findings. Our sample consists primarily of White men. Therefore student veterans' psychological turmoil facing higher education's "unlearning" demand is largely based on a "White man's" experience. Racial/ethnic minority or female veterans may not exhibit such strong feelings towards the expectation to unlearn their prior military identity because they have experienced similar requirements to adjust as members of minority groups in other contexts. Our participants' experiences are deeply intertwined with their dominating racial and gender status in the military and American civilian society. Their experiences, up to this point, fit the norm, exposing them for the first time to the challenges of a cultural minority. Accepting this reality, their privilege, may have influenced their difficulties while returning to higher education/civilian society. Although we seek to advocate for our own participants, highlighting the cultural context of their challenges and moving away from a deficit perspective, we believe this discussion reveals a critical interpretation of their arduous struggles as a first-time cultural minority in higher education, and in the larger social and cultural contexts where race and gender are the primary axes of power relationships.

CONCLUSION

This study suggests that it is not only student veterans who need cultural competency training entering higher education; faculty and staff also need professional development opportunities to better understand student veterans' experiences and challenges in academia (Dillard & Yu, 2018; Kastle et al., 2019; Klaw et al., 2021). Shifting the onus of accountability for student veterans' academic success from their shoulders to the institution itself (e.g., faculty and staff) is an essential step to create a truly veteran-friendly campus (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017).

As gatekeepers, faculty/staff perceive upholding the quality of higher education as one of their most important responsibilities and often resist compromising institutional standards (Wilcox & Ebbs, 1992). While acknowledging faculty/staff's roles and responsibilities as gatekeepers in higher education, this study also serves as a reminder that

attempts at equality can neglect students whose cultural value systems differ from those embraced in higher education. Participants' narratives provide evidence that the fundamental cause of student veterans' transitional challenges might be deeper rooted in their cultural conflict in higher education than previously understood. Faculty's critical self-reflection on their changing roles in relation to diversity issues in higher education can help them intentionally develop policies and practices designed to create an atmosphere conducive to the exploration and inclusion of many diverse student groups.

ADDITIONAL FILE

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Appendices.** Appendix A and B. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v9i1.416.s1>

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Carrie Carter  orcid.org/0000-0003-1644-6130
North Carolina State University, US

Joe Hoon Lim  orcid.org/0000-0001-8167-1866
University of North Carolina at Charlotte, US

Claudia Interiano-Shiverdecker  orcid.org/0000-0002-5487-6724
University of Texas at San Antonio, US

Jerry Dahlberg  orcid.org/0000-0003-2778-5349
University of Tennessee, US

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