



Editor's Introduction: Writing by Veterans Studies Students

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COLLECTION:
WRITING BY VETERANS
STUDIES STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

As a teacher of veterans studies courses and the founder and editor in chief of this journal, I have always wanted to publish a special collection of writing by students studying veterans studies (through coursework). This collection is the first of its kind to be published in the journal's 8-year history, but hopefully will not be its last. This brief essay explains the course I taught and the assignment I posed to students, before introducing the 6 students (and their articles) whose work appears in this collection.

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Since the journal's founding in November 2015, I have wanted to showcase student writing; specifically, the writing of students taking veterans studies courses. Over the journal's 8-year existence, I pitched the idea to a few colleagues to put together a special issue of their students' work; I asked colleagues who taught at military academies or had taught either designated veterans studies courses or tackled relevant topics and themes in a literature or sociology course. To date, no one has curated the deliverables for a special collection of student work focused on veterans studies topics. Thus, I took it upon myself to compile the journal's first collection of veterans studies student essays.

This collection includes 6 argumentative essays written by undergraduate students who took the online course *Veterans' Voices* that I taught for the University of California, Irvine during the winter 2023 quarter. Before sharing details about the essays and their authors, it may be helpful to provide information about the course.

Veterans' Voices is cross-listed as both a social science course and an upper-division writing course; nearly all of the students who take the course admit to enrolling because it fulfills their upper-division writing requirement to graduate. The course is one of three that comprise the university's certificate in veterans studies (Ashbach & Ledbetter, 2023; Ledbetter, 2019); most students enrolled in the course don't know about the certificate until taking the course and have never heard of the field of veterans studies. Some students have backgrounds of prior (e.g., self-identify as veterans), current (e.g. guard or reserves), or future military service (e.g., ROTC); some come from military families (Ashbach & Ledbetter, 2023); but most students have no military connection. Typically the course enrolls 50–60 students.

I have taught the course three times and am preparing for my fourth attempt. The past two times I have taught the course, I have relied on an orientation of content employed in the four-part docuseries *American Veteran* (Ives & Williams, 2021). Over the 10-week term, students watch the entire series one episode at a time concurrent with other assigned readings and media, including but not limited to different genres and modalities veterans have used and use to share their voices (poetry, op-ed, creative nonfiction, fiction, mixed media, Congressional testimony, etc.). The series takes the viewer through the journey of entering the military and surviving boot camp, into what service looks like, specifically military missions and international/combat deployments. In the series's final two episodes, viewers explore how service members become veterans in a legal, psychological, and social sense. Like the series, I designed the course to guide students along an individual's process of "becoming a veteran" and how, along the way, they catalog

their lived experiences through writing, music, activism, etc. The course concludes by examining questions of who counts as a veteran by weighing the legal definition with veterans' lived experiences, stereotyped understandings, and cultural privileging of certain veterans over others, as well as who/what benefits from perpetuating the civilian-military divide, and if there are solutions for bridging or absolving the divide.

Each week students engage in a written, online discussion related to the assigned media and module topic (e.g., political activism). By participating in discussions interests naturally emerge. Interests that inspired the topics for their final papers: the assignment that produced the essays published herein. Indeed, readers will observe course themes (e.g., the civilian-military divide, boot camp) in the student's essays. The assignment description I gave students was minimal in the hopes of inspiring students to pursue topics of genuine interest: Craft a 5–7 page argument based on a single veterans studies related topic that was covered in the course materials. Students had to incorporate a combination of primary and secondary sources, at least one of which was assigned, although most students relied on several assigned sources to write their papers. Upon review of their first drafts in week 8, I asked several students if they would be interested in sharing their essays with a wider audience. Alan Almaraz, Hovig Dadayan, Anthony Palomado Agutos, Gavin M. Mosher, Amber Pope, and Nathan Quang Le—the authors of the essays featured in this collection—expressed interest and prepared their papers accordingly.

Each essay is roughly 5–7 pages and includes an argument, supporting evidence, references and citations, a counterargument, a refutation, a conclusion, and a short personal bio. These papers represent a range of topics and writing styles; they have been copyedited for errors but have not otherwise been revised or altered in any way. Readers will benefit from reading Alan Almaraz's argument titled "Veteran Stereotypes: The Cruz of the Civilian-Military Divide." Almaraz claims that "Stereotypes about veterans serve as the crux of the civilian-military divide," and defends his solution that the divide can only be bridged "through social connectivity and identity development during a veteran's readjustment to the civilian world."

Hovig Dadayan's essay "Let's Ask, Let Them Tell, and Listen: The Voices of Gay & Lesbian Veterans" investigates and "emphasiz[es] how gay and lesbian veterans are undervalued and understudied [in society and] they have come up against different, tougher experiences [than other veterans], simply because of who they love." Anthony Palomado Agutos' essay "Trained Perspective: Connection Between Boot Camp and the Civilian-Military Divide" looks at "the lasting effects that boot camp has on

veterans.” Dadayan lays out how boot camp “contributes to the civilian-military divide” by relying on veterans’ oral histories. In “Correcting the Narrative: Veteran Activism in the Post-Iraq Era,” Gavin M. Mosher describes, as his title reveals, how “American veterans turn to art, activism, and the internet as means through which they could tell narratives that accurately reflect their own experiences and to combat inaccuracies in media and government messages.” Amber Pope’s essay “Exploring the Emotional Landscape of Veterans: An Analysis of Poems About PTSD” analyzes the poetry of four veterans who wrote about their experiences with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Pope reveals “how veterans share their voices [through] poetry to escape the pain and suffering that PTSD can bring and ultimately find a sense of peace and comfort.” Arguing “How Military Service Affects Veteran Job Outcomes,” Nathan Quang Le “examines the issue of veterans’ civilian employment by considering veterans’ voices and research on the realities of “military friendly” companies and hiring practices.”

I hope readers will view this collection as an invitation to follow my lead and curate a collection of their students’ work tackling veterans studies related topics. Hopefully, this will not be the journal’s only collection of writing by veterans studies students. Upon reading these students’

essays, I believe readers will view the students’ engagement with common tropes and topics as refreshing.

COMPETING INTERESTS

I am the founder and editor of the journal.

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