



“Some Agency in the Situation”: Veterans in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Although benefits such as the G.I. Bill and Vocational Readiness and Employment services exist for American veterans reacclimating to civilian life, the world of higher education can seem like an overwhelming task for transitioning veterans. In an interview between Professor Benjamin Cooper and medically-retired Marine Corps Sergeant Charles Ray, they discuss Sergeant Ray's higher-education experiences, including the challenges and successes he has encountered at various institutions. The conversation underscores practical academic resources that are available specifically for American veteran students, as well as opportunities for bureaucratic efficiencies in universities and in Veterans Affairs. Ultimately, the interview offers advice for both veteran students and university personnel about how to support one another, and Sergeant Ray reminds veterans of the skills they have cultivated through their military service that prepare them for academic success.

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Charlie Ray is a decorated US Marine Corps veteran who served 9-years in numerous infantry roles and conducted combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. He earned multiple awards for combat valor and the Purple Heart for injuries sustained after being struck by an improvised explosive device. In 2012, he was medically retired and, through his rehabilitation journey, developed an appreciation and profound love for psychology. Charlie is currently pursuing an undergraduate degree in psychology at Lindenwood University, where he maintains a 4.0 GPA, and plans on graduating in the fall of 2024. While at Lindenwood, he works as a peer mentor and does a work-study for the Lindenwood Veteran Affairs Office. Upon completion of undergraduate studies, Charlie plans to attend graduate school to become a Licensed Clinical Social Worker. He desires to use his experience and pay it forward in a clinical setting.

Benjamin Cooper is associate professor of English and director of American Studies at Lindenwood University. His scholarship on veteran literature has been supported by a fellowship at the American Antiquarian Society and has appeared in scholarly journals such as *Arizona Quarterly* and *War, Literature, and the Arts* (forthcoming), in edited collections such as a volume from Rutgers University Press about the present generation's relationship with the War on Terror, and—for more popular audiences—online, most notably in collaboration with Washington University in St. Louis's *The Common Reader*. His book, *Veteran Americans: Literature and Citizenship from Revolution to Reconstruction*, was published by University of Massachusetts Press in 2018. After researching, writing, and publishing *Veteran Americans: Literature and Citizenship from Revolution to Reconstruction*, a book about veteran literature and citizenship during the 19th century, I wanted to move my focus from veterans of the past to veterans in the present day. When I met Charlie in a class I taught on the American short story, I knew right away he was a strong voice for student veterans like himself. We agreed to conduct this interview as a way to encourage and advocate for veteran students in higher education.

The interview that follows is a discussion between Charlie Ray (CR) and myself (BC) on his many experiences as a veteran traversing higher education in the United States. We met in a general education literature course I taught, and this is our first collaboration outside of a classroom environment.

BC

We're here to talk "professor to student" about life as a veteran, specifically, life as a student veteran at Lindenwood University, and hopefully in ways that are useful for other veteran students across the country. Could you summarize your journey in higher education up until this point?

CR

Before Lindenwood, I was at University of Texas at San Antonio where I started to study psychology. My time there ended with COVID because I needed to take classes that were very hands-on and practical. Online would have just been a nightmare for me. So, I worked in defense contracting as a way to make money, which meant I put college on the back burner. I felt lost then, as well, like I was regressing into a lifestyle that just wasn't good for me. Before Texas, I did a few classes at Miracosa Community College, when I was still in the Marine Corps at Wounded Warrior Battalion West.¹ There was a lot of dead time, so I decided to use tuition assistance to go to school.

BC

In the past, you've called yourself as "nontraditional of a student as you could possible find." What does that word "nontraditional" mean to you?

CR

For me, it means being 37 and having yet to finish my undergraduate degree. This is my third time in college. When I first got out of the military, I didn't really know what I wanted to do. I ran into a lot of issues, and I wanted to do something similar to my time in the Marine Corps. I joined the Marine Corps when I was 17 and went straight to boot camp. By the time I got medically retired, I was 25. At that time, I didn't even have a full understanding of who I was or what I actually liked or wanted to pursue. I was in a lost phase.

BC

When you were 17, you were not considering college at all?

CR

No. My goal was to become a marine, and I later decided to become a career Marine and do 20 years. Unfortunately, that got cut short after I was hit by an IED (Improvised Explosive Device) in 2010. I was told I wouldn't be able to work in a combat role anymore, but that was the whole reason why I was there. The best option I had was to take a medical discharge and collect retirement disability through the VA (US Department of Veterans Affairs), so that's what I opted for. College was never really on my radar during any of that time. I'm actually kind of glad it wasn't because I don't think at that point in my life I would have been as successful as I am now. When I started out taking college courses, I was actually pursuing nursing.

BC

Why nursing?

CR

I don't really know. The careers and fields of study I've fallen in love with all begin in my rehabilitation. While I was at the hospital, I saw nursing as a way to tap into a sense of duty and purpose. That's really what I was looking for when exiting the Marine Corps. Nursing appeared to offer me a "why," and obviously I was in hospitals a lot and I just felt like it would be a good fit and not necessarily too traumatic per se. I also don't like being pigeonholed into one thing, and I felt like nursing would be a good way, especially with the combat experience that I had, of helping treat trauma wounds. I've also always liked talking to people, getting to know people, and taking care of people.

BC

Two things that you just said struck me. One is that you don't want to be pigeonholed, and the second is the "why." I am not in the military and have never been. Yet I've worked with veteran students and written a book about American veteran authorship. I often wonder if when I'm talking to veteran students or writing about veteran writers, I'm not actually pigeonholing them myself. Usually in my experience in class, student veterans don't want to identify as such. I respect that decision not to pigeonhole a student and call out in public a facet of their identity that may not be relevant in the classroom. Can we explore what is relevant about your veteran experience for the classroom—if anything—because you being a veteran doesn't necessarily *have* to be relevant to you being a student. What would you say to that? Is being a veteran necessarily complementary or conflicting for you as a student—or is that even an appropriate question to ask?

CR

That's a great point, and I think it looks different for different people. When you're in the military, you have a little bit of autonomy and freedom of movement and self-determination. But at the end of the day, you're in the military. You're being told when to show up and especially if you're junior enlisted—where you're going to be living in the barracks. You're pigeonholed in that. I think a lot of people when they leave the military, they have all this freedom of movement. They remember working within all these confines and they don't want to go back to being confined during class.

Another aspect is that there are a lot of stereotypes out there. Veterans are a protected group, and I don't think a lot of people, just like with any protected class of individuals, want to be forced into a mold. They want to break apart. I think some may be apprehensive to share their veteran

status because they don't want those stereotypes being projected upon them. Some veterans want to almost reject that version of themselves.

This is something I talk about with good friends of mine, people that I went to combat with and just other veterans in general. You find yourself in an internal struggle when you leave the military. It is still a part of your identity and part of your story. It's not the whole story though. I think internally, there's a struggle over how much one's military experience defines one's life, especially if an individual has unfinished business. Maybe they were in a combat MOS (Military Occupational Specialty) but didn't see combat, which sits as a kind of shortcoming for them. I've seen that happen. So, some hold on for too long, and some go the other way. They just want to stuff it away like it didn't happen. I think that's problematic, too, because it did happen.

BC

I also sense there's a burden of representation for veterans. I remember in our course we shared about the American short story, your group presentation was on "The Lives of the Dead" by Tim O'Brien, a very famous Vietnam veteran author. I don't recall if you picked the story or if I picked it for you, but from my perspective, there's a reluctance in that exchange. "Okay, we're going to talk about war today. Don't point to the veteran." That fear of tokenism is real.

Part of why I wanted to talk to you is to understand how it is that veteran experience translates to the classroom, which is itself a context in search of purpose and identity. I teach American literature. I assign participation grades, and usually how it goes is if you show up and you bring your book, you get full credit. But this semester I tried something different. You still have to show up, but you also have to respond every week to what we learned in what I called the "Why Journal." You have to tell me (and yourself) why what we were doing in class that week *mattered*. The search for significance is very relevant in both the military and in college. What a professor is trying to do in a classroom is to demonstrate significance, mission, and purpose. "Here is a work of literature or here is a psychological model. This is compelling and relevant and crucial to your life." Sometimes that argument works, and sometimes it doesn't.

CR

From a veteran psychology standpoint, you also need to look for the "why" in experiences that were not so great. Say I experienced a trauma, like that IED that hit me in 2010. Had that bad thing not happened, well, I wouldn't have what I have today, which is an education. You have some agency in the situation.

BC

Agency, free will, drive, self-understanding. These concerns follow me to the office every day. I wonder also about the audience of this interview. Presumably it would be other student veterans or other veterans who are considering higher education, but I hope also teachers, administrators, and professors. Those categories are somewhat distinct. What do these different populations need to know about being a student veteran?

CR

For student veterans specifically, like I mentioned earlier, regardless of when you've exited the military or how long you were in it, the transition to academia is jarring. For the most part, the military is a very predictable and even level playing field. Then you come on a college campus and everyone's dressing how they want. There are no regulations on anything, just do and be whatever you want. It's a sensory overload. You're probably older than most of your peers, too. It can feel like you're walking around on an alien planet. You're just there by yourself, or so it feels, and that feeling becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy if you let it. So first, I'd say you have to lean into that discomfort. Talk to some of these people you don't know, and be confident in the fact that you have life experiences you can bring to class discussions. It's challenging, of course, but you can sit down, make yourself available, talk to people and use your resources.

I think the unfamiliar environment is one of the biggest things that veterans struggle with, and I don't think other people get that. I also don't think veterans give themselves enough credit for the tools and traits that they developed in the military. A lot of infantry guys focus on action. You'll hear a lot of stories where a veteran defines his time as carrying a gun, living by the gun, conducting raids. "This is what I did." But honestly, you did that one time. "Action" wasn't the end of what you learned in the military. What about establishing core values and learning time management? These are small things that are actually big, and I don't think people give themselves enough credit for that. They can help you be really successful in an academic setting.

BC

On the point about sensory overload, a professor's responsibility is to try to teach material and try to facilitate conversation. If you're in a room with 20 or 25 other human beings, they are bringing in with them their burdened lives. We are all defined in part by our past as we worry about the current moment. It's often a struggle, I think, for anybody—even the professor—to keep open that realization that we don't know fully where people are. You might be really struggling with the fact that some noises

are loud and clothing fashion is strange. And yet that's not a thought that necessarily will occur to Susie or Billy sitting next to you, let alone the professor.

CR

Student veterans should get to know their professors outside of the classroom, too. That's another example of leaning into discomfort and making yourself vulnerable. That's been really helpful for me because then you can tell your story to someone, and you don't have to give them all the intricate details. But it's nice to be like, hey, this is who I am. This is what I'm about.

BC

You keep emphasizing the need to be uncomfortable, to lean into discomfort.

CR

Discomfort is inevitable, and I think that's where people get stuck. They just freeze or they quit because it's uncomfortable, which is surprising to me because the military is based on discomfort. But in a university setting, there are resources to ease that discomfort. And it's my own anecdotal personal experience that every time I have asked for and leaned on resources, I have never regretted it. Just like I have never regretted going to talk to a professor.

BC

Share an example, please.

CR

There was a college algebra class at University of Texas. It had been probably 15 years since I had done anything that included letters and numbers together. We were doing a "p-series," which was a math operation that was something you were supposed to already know before algebra. This was supposed to be just a review, and I got a D on the first exam. I was beside myself. Yet in that moment, rather than saying "I can't do this, I'm old, algebra is dumb," I went up to my professor. I just leveled with him: "Hey, I'm a Marine Corps infantryman. The most math that I've done is working up call for fire missions. I'm 15 years removed from any of this, and I wasn't good at it then either." He heard me, and from then on two or three times a week I'd meet with him in his office and review the lessons. He dropped the lowest grade for the semester, so that D got dropped and I got an A in college algebra at the end. I did that with his help. It was not only that I sought out the resources myself, but I had faculty who were willing to meet me where I was and provide me with what I needed. Faculty actually cared about me as a human being and

cared about my education. It took up a lot of my time and his time, but that's what success can look like for everyone.

BC

Educators want to see their students succeed. I tell my students that real education is a full contact sport. It has its bumps and its bloody noses. Nobody wants a D, but when that happens, what are you going to do afterwards—walk away from that discomfort or lean into it as you keep suggesting? James Baldwin said that the job of an artist is to disturb the peace, to make things messy and make people uncomfortable. That's where real learning can and should happen. Persevering in discomfort has a carryover into other areas of your life as well.

CR

But you don't know that at first. You have all these thoughts in your head of what college is going to look like. You think you're going to have these super political professors and everyone's going to have extremist ideologies. I'm not saying those things don't exist, but in my personal experience, again, it really hasn't been that way. And even if someone is like that, I can still level them out. I can tell them my story and where I come from, and we create equilibrium in that relationship. If you don't do that, if you just try to take it all in like water from a fire hose without pushing anything out yourself, then yeah, you're going to get knocked down.

BC

Lastly, college administrators, presidents, deans, let's lump in the VA for that matter—these are the people who run the bureaucracy. I don't want to pigeonhole them as mere bureaucrats, but what do they need to know?

CR

This takes the conversation back full circle. I don't think enough credit is given to individual veterans who navigate the amount of bureaucracy required in order to use their benefits. But they absolutely should use their benefits. The GI Bill is not free. It's actually something we pay into while in the military. It's not 100% free. You have other programs available, too, like vocational rehabilitation. These are great programs, but they require a lot of bureaucracy, especially Voc-Rehab, which is not something you're guaranteed to get. There's an application process. Then there are other steps such as securing a housing allowance, which people need first in order to pay their bills because they're already in a time of transition. There's just a lot of ambiguity, a lot of stress. Again, my experience is that a lot of veterans in school get stuck in this bureaucratic loop, and that's when

they want to quit. I don't think anybody wants to see that, so administrators need to be mindful of the volume of bureaucracy.

Another area is class offerings. To maximize your housing allowance, you have to have at least one class on campus and you have to be a full-time student. But if you look at summer class offerings, for example, in a lot of smaller schools there may not be almost any classes on campus to take. If we're looking at academic institutions as businesses, veterans have a lot of weight when it comes to guaranteed income and retention. To help secure VA resources for veterans, there needs to be more on-ground summer classes. Why would you not want to facilitate and bolster programs for veterans and resources for veterans—if only in terms of return on investment?

BC

Absolutely. Since you've been to three different institutions of higher education, what has been your experience in each in terms of the mindfulness and responsiveness of the administration? Offering enough in-person summer classes would make more money for a university at the same time benefitting a student veteran who needs that class to maintain their housing allowance. Win-win. That's one example of an oversight that could be remedied if the institution was aware. How mindful have American universities been for you overall? How responsive?

CR

I don't know if you can put a number on it, but I've actually been really grateful for my experience of going from community college to a state institution to now here at Lindenwood, which is private. I haven't really had a lot of problems, but I notice subtle issues. In my work as a peer mentor to other student veterans, I notice the problems often are not even academic. Resources are put out in order to help student veterans who don't partake. As a result, sometimes those resources stop being offered, and then there's this upheaval. "There's no resources!" Well, they put them out there. So, I don't think it's all just on administrators specifically. It's up to student veterans too, to take advantage of those resources when they are available.

BC

I hope that this conversation will help veterans who are thinking about becoming students, or who are themselves already students. I hope they are open to what you've offered here. Lean into discomfort, seek out resources, find dedicated faculty and peer mentors. I hope that there's some benefit in that guidance.

CR

It's all just a work-in-progress for everyone, you know. A work-in-progress.

NOTE

- 1 Located at Camp Pendleton, California, Wounded Warrior Battalion West provides rehabilitation, counseling, and transition services for wounded Marines: <https://www.woundedwarrior.marines.mil/Unit-Home/Wounded-Warrior-Battalion-West/>. It is a designated battalion that was stood up to foster the transition of Marines who are pending medical retirement or discharge due to illness or injury; their only focus is navigating medical appointments and the exit process so Marines are not lost in the shuffle of their normal unit.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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