Journal of Veterans Studies

The Other, Other Students: Understanding the Experiences of Graduate Student Veterans

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As research continues to grow on student veterans it is important to recognize the multiple identities within the student veteran demographic. Graduate student veterans remain largely un-researched. This qualitative, descriptive study seeks to understand the lived experiences of graduate student veterans at a large research university in the southwest. Themes from the study include identity, matriculation, money matters, community, the demystification of the veteran, and graduate perspectives on undergraduate student veterans.

Keywords: student veterans, graduate students, qualitative methods

Introduction

Research on post 9/11 student veterans is growing but we have not scratched the surface of all there is to know. For early clarification, I invoke David Vacchi's (2012) useful definition of veteran, which includes, "any veteran who is a current or former member of the active duty military, the National Guard, or Reserves regardless of deployment status, combat experience, legal veteran status or GI Bill use" (p. 17). Numbers of student veterans enrolled are often misleading, as not all student veterans identify or are identified as veterans, and some post 9/11 benefits and state programs can be passed on to family members. Even in national literature and reports used to establish numbers for student veterans, information that distinguishes undergraduate and graduate student veterans is missing. According to the National Post-Secondary Student Aid Study (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013), 3.7% of undergraduates report using veterans' benefits (some use these benefits as dependents) and 3% of graduate students report using veterans' benefits. In both cases these numbers are flexible, as some student veterans do not use benefits for graduate work and some benefit users are dependents of veterans. "Establishing the count" of veterans enrolled on campuses, as suggested by Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming (2011) is an arduous task (p. 328). As the

majority of the literature on student veterans focuses either on undergraduate student veterans, or student veterans at institutions without graduate programs (i.e. community colleges and trade schools), graduate student veterans become an invisible population. The goal of this research is to describe the experiences of a handful of graduate student veterans and to suggest ways that we (i.e., faculty, staff, administrators, and students) can help create more welcoming and productive environments for graduate student veterans. This research boasts no blanket statements or fundamental truths about veterans, graduate students, or those students who identify as both. This research asks two simple questions:

1) What are the experiences of veterans enrolled in graduate programs and
2) What can make these experiences better?

The current student veteran is unlike any other veteran higher education has seen. Technology (military and media) and politics (global and national) have made this war markedly different. As a result, the servicemembers and thereby the student veterans that matriculate into higher education after serving are markedly different. Post 9/11 student veterans must be evaluated in new ways. We must do some fundamental ground-level investigatory work to understand them. And work has been done.[1] Many scholars have asked student veterans: "what is it like," "how do you make sense of it," and "what do you need?" This last question, "what do you need," has rightfully been given the most attention.

It has been suggested by Vacchi (2012) that student veterans research should focus on undergraduate student veterans who are no longer active duty, as they represent 90% of the student veteran population, and both graduate students and active duty students have additional forms of support (i.e., graduate department advisors and chairs or military personnel assigned to assist active duty students). While most academic research does not necessarily focus on undergraduate student veterans, there is no directed effort to understand the experiences of graduate student veterans.

Qualitative research that explores the experiences of student veterans does not distinguish undergraduate from graduate status for their population (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009), only interviews undergraduate populations at a university (Baumann, 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010), or studies student veterans at community colleges or other institutions that do not have graduate programs (Persky & Oliver, 2011; Barnhart, 2011).

It is critical that we understand the experiences of veterans in graduate programs, as enrollment is likely to increase. Abel, Bright, and Cooper (2013) note, "veterans who intend to enroll in graduate or professional programs after completing their undergraduate degrees may save their [GI] benefits for graduate school, which is usually more expensive than undergraduate study" (p. 170). When the goal of student veteran research was the practical, service-based evaluations of veterans' experiences, an undergraduate preoccupation or a graduate student blind spot was understandable. The focus of scholarly work must be to first serve populations that are facing immediate challenges. While not all veterans struggle personally, financially, or academically as they enroll and reenroll in school, some do. We must prepare schools, faculty, and staff to help student veterans negotiate higher education (as we must for first generation students, LGBT students, students of color, and any other minority population). However, as the job gets more complicated, as veterans transition from a *problem* that needs to be *fixed* to a student demographic and identity dimension that needs to be understood–as the traditional models of transition theory and adult education come up wanting–it will become increasingly important to consider *all* student veterans. It is along this tributary of veteran research that I push off. Vacchi and Berger (2014) call for more research on the multiples ways that veterans identify. Thus, we must seek to understand the experiences of graduate student veterans in order to better understand the diverse population of graduate students and to better understand the breadth of student veterans.

Methodology

This work is a descriptive study. Building on Sandelowski's (2000) work in nursing, the descriptive study is often discarded as elementary or lacking the necessary complexities of descriptive studies' qualitative brethren: phenomenology, ethnography, case study, etc. Sandelowski (2000) suggests that descriptive studies: (1) exist as their own unique research format; (2) do not pull the researcher too far from the data; and (3) operate as knowledge complete and not just an introduction into more complex or "sophisticated" research approaches. This work explores the lived experiences of 11 post-9/11 veterans enrolled in graduate programs. The goal of the research is to describe and understand. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue,

> There are multiple constructed realities that can be studied only holistically; inquiry into these multiple realities will inevitably diverge (each inquiry raises more questions than it answers) so that prediction and control are unlikely outcomes although some level of understanding (*verstehen*) can be achieved (p. 37).

It is this *verstehen* or larger construction that I am looking to understand. Through various recruitment activities, I engaged 11 participants. Recruiting strategies included emailing fliers on veteran listservs and having a retired Colonel personally ask veteran students. Some participants suggested other participants, increasing my number through snowballing.

All participants met two requirements for inclusion: (1) they were students enrolled in graduate or professional work; and (2) they had served in the military after September 11, 2001. While all students were enrolled in the same large research extensive university in the southwest, some students (in online programs) were contacted by phone. At my research site, 616 students use some sort of state or national veteran benefit for education. 244 or 40% of these students are enrolled in graduate programs at the time of this research. These percentages are high, as the research site has

a strong military culture and is often recognized as a veteran friendly campus. Though this high percentage is not nationally representative, it is not unique.

Table 1. Participant demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Field	Degree	Branch	Status
Allen[2]	Male	White	Business	MBA	Marine	Veteran
Bill	Male	White	Business	MBA	Navy	Veteran
Charles	Male	White	Adult Education	PhD	Army	Active Duty
Della	Female	White	Business	MBA	Army	Veteran
Eric	Male	White	Medicine	MD	Army	Active Duty
Frank	Male	African American	Human Resource Development	PhD	Army	Veteran
Greg	Male	White	Industrial Engineering	ME	Navy	Active Duty
Hank	Male	White	International Affairs	MPIA	Army	Veteran
Ivan	Male	White	Computational Mathematics	MS	Air Force	Active Duty
James	Male	White	International Affairs	Graduate Certificate	Army	Veteran
Kathryn	Female	White	Agricultural Development	MAgr	Air Force	Veteran

All participants were interviewed in a semi-structured manner. As Seidman (2006) notes, "[a]t the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (p. 9). The semi-structured format gave the researcher the opportunity to narrow the scope of the interview while still remaining open to unforeseen parts of participants' lived experiences (Rabionet, 2011). Interviews lasted between 25–95 minutes. After having the interviews professionally transcribed, I edited and adjusted the transcripts while listening to the audio. In an effort to include the broad range of topics that the

student veterans suggested, I used structural coding as defined by Saldaña (2009); structural coding is "appropriate for virtually all qualitative studies, but particularly for those employing multiple participants…or exploratory investigations to gather topics, lists, or indexes of major categories or themes" (Saldaña, 2009, p. 67). In the codes and eventual themes of the structural coding process, it is possible to hear a conversation coming from the narratives. The data that follows is a summarized transcript of that conversation.

In an effort to build trustworthiness in the piece, I engaged in strategies of credibility and confirmability as explored by Krefting (1991). As there were no graduate voices represented in scholarship, I triangulated data through prolonged interaction with the transcripts, member-checking with participants, and peer review from members of the participant population. Additionally, my research was selected for a random protocol and information audit by my institutional review board. This experience bolstered trustworthiness as Krefting (1991) explains that auditability is a strategy towards both dependability and confirmability.

Data

Though there are many things I "heard" in the conversation, in the interest of space and organization, I only discuss six major themes. While I will give summaries of the rules of inclusion and exclusion for each theme, I will focus mainly on the words of the participants. These words are often, in my opinion, the only part of scholarship worth reading. Each section begins with representative quotes from participants to exemplify each theme. This authorial decision was made to make sure that the work honored participant voices above my own. The themes I will discuss include: (1) identity; (2) matriculation; (3) money matters; (4) community; (5) the demystification of the veteran; and (5) graduate student perspectives on undergraduate student veterans.

Identity

- We are a very unique demographic. Our experiences are not monolithic by any means, because what the private sector has, military has those jobs as well, whether it's a physician, attorney, truck driver, medic–you name it. Firefighter, police officer, they are all in the military. We have those same skill sets as well as some of us served in combat, so we have a different perspective sometimes on the world. (Frank)
- When you are creating any sort of policy, it might just be helpful to keep that in mind that in mind that not all veteran is a veteran is a veteran. (Eric)
- My identity as a veteran shapes everything. (Frank)
- I don't generally identify as a veteran I would say, just because I didn't enjoy my experience. I didn't even keep my uniforms, you know, like your dress uniforms. I gave away my medals to a soldier when I was leaving. (James)

The theme of identity included any veteran's comments on race, gender, marital status, branch, deployment history, military rank, student status, or personal history. Of particular interest was Frank (my only African American participant). When asked how his race factors into his identity, he said, "I've always seen myself as a competitive individual, and I resonate with success, whatever that looks like, success and in myself as an American veteran, a combat veteran, and then race comes further down the line." Frank spoke with finality in his answer, and the subject was changed.

Both women participants discussed negotiating their identity as women and spouses of military husbands. Della even described her status as woman and army spouse as, "another level of otherness." In early interviews I incorrectly presumed that every participant would identify as a veteran. Veteran status was often linked to deployment, and those who did not deploy were both identified (and self-identified) as not "fully veteran." Ivan suggested that when using the term veteran, "the connotation of it is that you have gone to war and come back. I don't really feel like I'm associated with 'veteran' as much as just active duty." As many graduate students were and are

officers in the military, many discussed how their identity as an officer changes relationships with other veterans who are not. Finally, when negotiating the two identities of veteran and student, many responded that they identify more as a graduate student than they do as a veteran, though many discussed their veteran status as central to who they were.

Matriculation

- The 20-year mark is where you get a pension. A lot of people that are in the service 8, 9, 10, 12, 14, you hear a lot of them racing towards that 20 and then they want to get out. It's like that financial incentives to do so, but I didn't join the Marine Corps for money and I wasn't going to stay in the Marine Corps for money. I decided if I was going to do something for money, business school is a pretty good place to teach you about money. (Allen)
- It's expected, at some point, you're going to get a masters. If you're going to stay ... at 20 years in the military, you have to get a master's degree at some point. (Bill)

The theme of matriculation included all responses that suggested purpose or selection process of enrolling in graduate studies. Financial challenges were excluded from this theme. Reasons for graduate studies differed for active duty and non-active duty. Active duty participants predominately continued education for the unique training that it would give them as in the case of Charles, a PhD student in Adult Education, and Eric, a second-year medical student. Other active duty participants, however, suggested that their graduate programs were a necessary step in their growth within the military. Greg explained that he had "two and half years of shore duty" in which to get his master's. He had thought about a MBA but recognized that it may not be that valuable if he stayed in the military. Ivan suggested that for officers, a master's degree was "highly encouraged." He then continued, "there is a huge pressure to get a degree," and if you fail to do so, "it looks like your stagnating and in a military where there's too many people because no one wants to get out ... everyone tries to stay as long as possible ... if you don't get more education, you'll likely be kicked

out." Participants in the MBA program want a step into the business world where they can network, speak the language, and be successful. Frank wants to be a professor. Hank and James were both unclear about how their degree was specifically working towards a next step. Kathryn, very candidly, explained that as a student she receives GI money that has become a second income. "Truth be told, the only reason I'm pursuing a master's right now is because of the baby ... I can go to school and it's helping to supplement our income." When selecting their program, some chose it because of its convenience (e.g., geographic or online opportunities) and others selected it because of its treatment of veterans. Della explained that when selecting a school, "[the university] was always warm…that was one of the main reasons why I'm here right now is because [the university] seemed to really care, particularly care about the fact that I was a veteran." Other participants from Della's program expressed the same feeling of being valued as a veteran. Allen recounted a conversation with an administrator who said that if the administrator could fill the whole program with veterans, she would because of "their discipline, responsiveness, adaptability, and willingness to learn."

Money Matters

- "A lot of people come with different exact circumstances ... So, I tell you, if I had the full GI Bill, then it would be a piece of cake ... No questions asked kind of thing, but when you don't fit in the standard cookie cutter idea of someone going back to school, when you don't have that, then it's a little different." (Hank)
- "I used Chapter 33, the Post 9-11 GI Bill. When I first started using it, it was a dream ... The downfall now is, political ranting aside, certain people cut [the continuous pay]. Now you are only paid for your monthly stipend per the actual days of class you are in classes ... I've ended up amassing student loans ... so I'd have something to pay the bills." (Kathryn)
- "It basically went into this Catch 22 system where they said 'Yes, our system is wrong. We're not going to fix it. The only solution is for you to somehow circumvent our system illegally, break our rules, and somehow become a [state] citizen,' which of course is not possible. It was like falling off the end of the earth." (Hank)

Many participants discussed people in their programs who would immediately attend to their (academic and financial needs). Building on Vacchi's (2012) argument, graduate students have additional sources of support, including assistance in managing financial concerns. Additionally, they rarely have to play the transcript game that undergraduate student veterans tend to lose. Their degree is their ticket into a graduate program. The burden of transferring experience as credit and navigating institutions that may or may not accept a veteran's credit is predominately an undergraduate woe. They do, however, have some challenges negotiating how to best use their funds as graduate students, especially since many of them only have partial funds, and some want to "save" some of those benefits for family. Furthermore, as the research site is located in a state with a generous tuition assistance program for veterans, the choice of what to use and how to use it is difficult. Active duty participants had multiple ways of financing their programs depending on what they had used and what was still available to them. Greg explains that he uses a "mixture of the Post 9-11 GI Bill and tuition assistance." Some participants recognized that poor advice early in their program was financially damaging in the long run. Bill explained,

> It's like a mystery, like nobody tells you what you're going to do ... and there's nobody saying 'Okay, you're going to use this benefit, and this benefit, and this benefit.' Looking back, I should have done my benefits differently because I didn't find out the right way to do it ... I lost $2000 a month.

Navigating finances seemed more confusing to non-active duty veterans. For Eric and Charles (active-duty "investments") everything was done for them. Charles explained that though all GI money is wisely spent because soldiers "are very loyal ... have sworn to uphold and defend the constitution of the United States," it is easier to navigate finances when a degree is meeting the needs of the army directly. "It's almost cynical, but it's almost like it seems that since they're not directly

benefitting from you getting educated ... there's just not that much of a attention to detail to get [non active-duty's] stuff approved and done."

Community

- "Most of the people that I've become friends with were either in the service or have a strong connection to the service in some way through a brother or a sister or a dad, somebody that served and made them feel connected to it. I don't think that was intentional. They're just similar people with similar values. I think they gravitate towards each other." (Allen)
- "There's going to be shared suffering and shared problems but there are other people out there who have issue or challenges that you guys can relate to…whatever you're feeling and whatever your challenges are, there's a group out there. There's somebody out there that can relate to you." (Allen)

The theme of community broadly included all comments about building nexuses of support with those who identify and those who do not identify as veterans.. Worthy of a longer discussion than it will receive in this brief summary, graduate student veterans discussed connections to civilian graduate students, other fellow veteran graduate students, undergraduate veterans, and mentorship relationships with military personnel. The two beginning quotes by Allen show showcase how community can be found inside and outside of those familiar with the service. While he recognizes that those with personal or family history that includes the military are natural allies, those outside of the military can still resonate with particular challenges or needs. That said, Bill explained that friendships in graduate school were difficult when compared to those in the military. Due to the transitory nature of the military, everyone quickly adapted to create new friendships. He explained that in graduate school, "it's different because everybody's older, everybody has their best friends and all that. It's friendship, but it's not."

Considering mentors, some participants, like Charles, expressed that they have long-standing mentor relationships with people in the military. Others, like Bill, suggested that they were too old to

need a mentor. Regardless, all were generally supportive of opportunities to connect veterans with one another. Eric said it "would be cool ... to start a family so to speak, I have a mentor and as I move through school I take on a mentee." Allen said he would, "be interested in talking to or interacting more with the guys that come through the undergrad program just so they have someone to identify with who's a bit older, a bit more mature." Allen, feeling an absence in support as a graduate student, began his own small network:

> I got a group of five other guys to form a community group and there are six of us that meet about every week. We talk to each other ... We talk about what's going on in our lives, about school. We talk about faith, talk about whatever's going on.

For some, like Allen, support was a peer activity. For others, like Charles, it was a professional relationship that helped direct his path. For Della, president of an international organization for women in business graduate programs, support came in the form of an online mentoring relationship (www.service2school.org). For all participants, mentoring took different meanings that included navigating practical responsibilities (e.g., registering, financial aid, and setting medical appointments), and navigating personal responsibilities (e.g., community, transition, and relationships).

Demystification of veterans

- "A lot of people have been very appreciative of military service and the really like and respect it, but just don't know what to do with it. That's just very honest. A lot of people are 'Thank you for your service. We really like it." And then, what do I do with that?" (Allen)
- "I feel like there's a lot of assumptions made about us in the military. I've has some other graduate students go, 'Well, you're not different. I thought you would be a lot more kind of authoritarian and more rigid, and you don't seem that way.' I think

> there's just some assumptions, a stereotype that they have being in the military." (Charles)

Many interviewees responded to the idea that veterans are a difficult demographic to understand or serve. Their message was simple: Graduate student veterans are more similar to other graduate students than not. Allen explained,

> whatever you're feeling as a veteran, your circumstances may be different, but the challenges and problems aren't. If you're struggling with alcoholism because you're coping with PTSD, you might be the only person you know with PTSD, but you're not the only person who has to live with it…There's going to be shared suffering and shared problems but there are other people out there who have issues or challenges that you guys can relate to.

Participants made it clear that while there was close connection between people who served in any capacity, their challenges and successes were not so unique that they couldn't interact or connect with civilian graduate students. When asked what he wished administrators knew about veterans, Bill responded,

> if you look at a typical [older] undergrad, that's what a veteran undergrad looks like ... You wouldn't treat a 24-year-old the same ... If he's going to grad school, you treat him like a grad student. That's the biggest thing I would think of, is maybe you can't ... just because they're veteran, there's some mythological difference between him and every other student. There's probably not.

Due to a lack of knowledge about the experiences of men and women in the military, participants explained that people rarely know how to react. Della recalled that when she says her husband is in Afghanistan, "a lot of people have no idea what to say." Eric discussed his application process at a different school and how "nobody would touch" his veteran identity or experiences in Afghanistan. A sentiment of reserved support seems to connect veteran graduate students with civilian colleagues

and faculty. Echoing Allen, civilians just don't know what to do with veterans' experiences, service, or identity.

Graduate perspectives of undergraduate student veterans

- "I was coming back to grad school for a purpose. I planned it; I knew where I was going ... You're not going to go do two years and try to figure out what you're going to do or switch majors. I'm getting an MBA, see the light in the tunnel, and that's what you're playing for. If you're an undergrad, I assume they don't know what they're going to do." (Bill)

Participants' perspectives of undergraduate student veterans included a lack of direction and desire to reclaim the "collegiate" experience they may have missed out on by enlisting before finishing (or starting) higher education. More often than not, descriptors of undergraduates were couched in discussions of what graduate students were not. Della explained, "it's a very different narrative for graduate students because we have degrees so usually our ambitions for going back to school are very different then ... or not very different but just not in the same line as someone who's going to get a bachelor's degree." Eric discussed some veterans in undergraduate programs that were,

> just a ping pong ball in the system [and] never grew up ... they came in at 18, they got 3 deployments in and they are just kicking ass for 3 years, and they get out and there's no system to push them around anymore and they are stalled. They still have that 17 or 18 year old mindset and they don't know what to do. They play video games and collect GI bills and it's rough but how do you…unless you have the resources to counsel them in, how can you do it?

This acceptance of non-motivated or "stalled" undergraduates seemed to permeate graduate student veteran perspectives. Going further, Eric admitted that he, "personally looks down on what a lot of people are doing when they get out. It's literally the script for enlisted guys to get out of the Army,

collect unemployment for as long as possible and the GI Bill, take enough classes for GI Bill and it all runs out for nothing, jut to delay the inevitable."

Bill explained that graduate student veterans are "not trying to do the undergrad thing. I'm not getting drunk every night and having frat parties ... I'm looking for my next professional career, the thing I'm going to do for 20 years. I'm not looking to have a great time." Activities usually associated with the undergraduate experience were often discussed with a measured distance. Graduate students have already experiences undergraduate school, and from my understanding of the participants, there was no desire to experience it again. Charles offered that undergraduates more likely need assistance in ways that graduate students do not because undergraduate students, "have maybe been on more deployments than us that have been in the graduate level and that they may have more complex issues and problems or may not have the coping skills to deal with it." Charles further explained that he feels it is the responsibility of "master's degree and PhD-level military students ... to make sure [they] help those soldiers that are struggling more in the undergraduate level."

Discussion and Conclusions

The 11 interviews from which the previous data comes are the first qualitative attempt to understand the experience of veterans enrolled in graduate programs. While their voices are, in my opinion, the most salient part of this work, it is important to capture those things alluded to but not said and those points that need more dedicated discussion. The value of this research is threefold: (1) the interviews provide insight on the unique and diverse experiences of graduate students in post-baccalaureate work; (2) the interviews offer "insider" observations on undergraduate veterans; and (3) the interviews suggest new ways of looking at all veterans.

I offer four conclusions (and best practices) from my research. The "we" in the following conclusions implicates faculty, staff, administration, and all members of the graduate education

community. While I write as a faculty member, I recognize that a shift in paradigm must happen throughout the higher education.

1. We need to better appreciate the multiple identities of veterans (specifically graduate veterans) as they continue to join and contribute to academic communities.
2. We need to recognize that there are unique financial, scheduling, and administrative issues connected with graduate programs.
3. We need to recognize that the "cryptic" or "misunderstood" experiences of veterans are often constructed and plagued with deficit implications.
4. We need to engage the graduate student veteran population to provide community with, leadership for, and insight on the veteran undergraduate community.

Multiple identities of veterans

Graduate student veterans express and experience multiple identities. While program status is one of these (degree level and discipline), others include gender, race, marital status, parental status, active duty status, rank, military branch, deployment history, and combat history. As Hart and Thompson (2013) point out, "distinctions [between veterans] can bring with them pronounced hierarchies, expectations, and epistemologies that can deeply affect classroom dynamics" (p. 11). The ways that universities recognize undergraduate (assumed civilian) identities (Abes, Jones, & McEwan, 2007) incorporates rings or orbitals of identity that surround a core consisting of personal attribute, personal characteristics, and personal identity. These proposed (orbiting) identities include sexual orientation, race, gender, social class, religion and culture. While these findings resonate with earlier work on undergraduate student veterans (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Iverson & Anderson, 2013), through my interviews, I recognize that this orbit or ring of culture is particularly complicated in the case of graduate student veterans. My participants align with the culture of their graduate programs, their families, and their communities (civilian and military) in particular ways. The culture

of the military alone allows several dimensions and measures of identity. Some of these identities are considered static or assumed (i.e., "the veteran identity"), when in reality they are constantly being presented or withheld depending on the situation and what social or cultural capital can be gained from their display. Moreover, there is an assumption that all former or current military resonate with the term veteran.

In order to explore this unique phenomenon, I use the term "veteran veritas." The Latin *veritas* can encompass "truth, truthfulness, verity ... [or] the true or real nature" of something (Lewis & Short, 1907, p. 1974). The word hinges on the Latin *verus,* which can mean many things including genuine, speaking or containing the truth, real, and actual (Lewis & Short, 1907; pp. 1978–1979). It is important to recognize that some veterans do not associate with the term "veteran." Higher education tends to use inclusive definitions (like Vacchi's, 2012). Some definitions even include family members of veterans as "veterans" when discussing veteran issues. However, the veterans themselves do not always subscribe to such descriptions. Due to both lack of combat experience and general distaste for their experience in the military, several graduate students who had served in the military did not consider themselves veterans. This is further complicated by the fact that for many civilian student affairs practitioners, the term veteran holds a weight and honor. To not acknowledge these men and women as veterans would seem dishonorable. An implication of this research is that veterans need to be asked if they identify as veteran in the same way that student are asked how they gender-identify or race-identify. This notion of veteran *veritas* will complicate some enrollment statistics but it will provide a more accurate and respectful way of identifying *all* students in the ways they wish to be identified.

Unique scheduling, financial, and administrative issues

As all graduate student veterans have completed an undergraduate degree, the usual troubles of course transfer and credit for experience are not common concerns. Indeed, navigating college is

not a particular challenge to graduate student veterans as all have done it in some capacity prior to matriculation. Additionally, graduate programs have special offices and personnel to address student concerns. Unlike undergraduate student advisers, graduate student advisers are able to consult on both academic and financial matters. Thus for many graduate student veterans, the bureaucracy is not a major hurdle. However, poor advice or a failure to see all options results in some graduate student veterans using less advantageous financial aid plans. Particularly students in states with state-supported veteran aid may find that using the Montgomery GI Bill would be more advantageous than the Post 9-11 GI Bill. Unfortunately, these students rarely learn this until it is too late. While this phenomenon is already reported in the literature (Mikelson & Saunders, 2013), my research implies that in addition to veteran support offices and financial aid offices that serve veterans, graduate departments who advise veterans on financial matters must become intimately aware of all opportunities veterans have to fund their education.

Next, graduate student schedules do not always follow traditional academic calendars. Classes often start early or go late. For students being funded by government aid, this means that payment may not come for several weeks (even months) after classes have begun. For those veterans that depend on GI money, this can make the early weeks of a graduate semester quite challenging. Many veterans struggle with late payments or slow reimbursement processes on the traditional academic schedule, much less one that is non-traditional.

As many graduate students are supporting families, those that distribute government assistance must recognize that untimely payments and the gaps in aid that come over summer and winter breaks can put undue stress on military families. If the Post 9-11 GI Bill continues to cut and prorate funding for months the students are not in school, institutions may need to think of ways to financially serve veterans so veterans are not overwhelmed with student loans. Financial packages also need to be considered in light of the tremendous fees that are often attached to graduate

programs, particularly those students taking online classes. In many cases these fees are not covered by state and government support and can often be more expensive than tuition.

Administratively it is wise to recognize that many veteran students may be matriculating into graduate programs without claiming veteran status or requesting aid. This way, veterans can reserve generous state and federal benefits for loved ones. Traditional models of enrollment management that lean on financial aid for veteran identification may not be appropriate for locating *all* graduate student veterans.

Unpacking the "mystery" of graduate student veterans

Building on Vacchi's (2012) concern that psychological problems and other war-related challenges and deficiencies are often exaggerated, veterans responded that they are not that different from other graduate students. In fact, attempts to treat them differently based on their status as veterans often leads to underestimating their potential or in some way limiting them. Several students commented on the fact that they were frustrated with the immaturity, disrespect, and laziness of the civilian graduate peers with whom they shared classes. Traditional deficit models seem to have no place in the conversation. As Valenica (1997) explains, deficit models observe a failure (academic or social), trace the failure to an identifying characteristic (usually race or class), ignore all other explanations for the failure (poor teachers, service, or administration), and then aggressively go about "fixing" the deficit. While deficit models seems to permeate veteran literature, there is no empirical evidence saying that veterans are failing at anything, particularly graduate student veterans who are often recruited and courted due to their work ethic, leadership ability, and strong moral compass. Hart and Thompson (2013) add that most training sessions for faculty "fail to engage in the nuances of military service, wars, careers, and disabilities in favor of, interestingly, a briefing model whose effect is to perpetuate one dimensional narratives about what it means to be a 'veteran'" (p. 4). The deficiency seems to be administrative and university community failure to know "how to deal"

with veterans, assuming the process is far different from how civilian students are taught, served, engaged, and assessed.

Participants explained that many civilians did not know what to do with their status (or their spouse's status) as a veteran. Whether at dinner parties or in interviews, silence or subject changes seemed to be the best remedies to any awkward or uncomfortable conversation about military history, save the quick conversation about Bull Run. While antagonistic or politically motivated comments are not welcome, participants encouraged any conversation that would demystify the veteran and move towards classroom, department, and campus community. Understanding diversity means recognizing differences, but then working towards embracing those differences as part of the larger community.

Graduate student veterans as a resource

Graduate student veterans are a useful resource for understanding undergraduate student veterans because they are insiders in the veteran community by often outsiders in the undergraduate community. Most of our literature juxtaposes veteran undergraduates and civilian undergraduates assuming that all differences between them are based on their veteran status. The opinions and observations of graduate student veterans explain that some undergraduate characteristics are not solely reflective of a veteran status, but instead the aggregate of a veteran status, a young age, a collection of intense, life-changing experiences, a lack of clear direction and support, and a somewhat steady income to support their lifestyle. These observations imply that while the veteran status may be one of many factors that contribute to student performance (positive and negative), but it is not the only one.

The majority of participants also expressed some feeling of responsibility or kinship for and with undergraduate student veterans. Specifically, Charles, an enlisted PhD student felt that it was his duty to help undergraduate student veterans. As many graduate student veterans have served as

officers (often in charge of many men and women), it is not surprising in the university community that graduate student veterans would feel the same need to serve.

Significance of the Study

It is imperative that we understand the experiences of *all* students in order to create an educational environment that serves *all* students. Due to their small number in postsecondary education, veterans have historically not received adequate study. As more and more veterans return to traditionally civilian institutions of higher education, however, understanding veterans' experiences is paramount. Specifically, those students who have served who are matriculating or returning to graduate programs need special attention. As the personalities and experiences of graduate students have a higher probability of affecting student communities and classroom communities because of small class and program sizes, how graduate students understand their experience and make meaning of it is important for faculty, staff, administrators, and fellow students to understand.

Additionally, as veterans have sacrificed traditional educational paths to serve and protect, it should be a priority for public institutions to work towards creating environments that understand and serve returning veterans well. Many programs actively seek veteran students because of their determinedness, work ethic, and maturity. As graduate admissions programs adjust to the increasing diversity of graduate students in the United States, this work will give universities a view of what the enrollment and matriculation process is like for graduate student veterans, help understand the experiences inside and outside of the classroom, and may shed light on how universities can serve civilian graduate students and undergraduate student veterans. Future research should look at wider swaths of graduate student veterans to determine demographics (gender, race, military branch, military rank, combat history, deployment history, discipline, and degree) so that graduate admissions and orientation programs are better prepared to serve graduate student veterans.

Additionally, the socialization and professionalization of graduate student veterans could be explored using traditional models of graduate socialization (Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). As more veterans are recruited and admitted to university and professional programs, it is in the interest of schools, states, and the nation to help them succeed. The first step towards success is not policy—it is understanding.

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Notes

[1] See Ackerman (2008, 2009), Carr (2010), Diamond (2012), Diramio (2008, 2009, 2011), Hamrick (2010, 2013), Hammond (2013), Jarvis (2011), Livingston (2011, 2013), Persky (2011), Rumann (2010, 2011, 2013), Ryan (2011), Vacchi (2012), McBain (2010, 2012).

[2] "Allen" was my first interview and was highly invested in the research project. The ubiquity of his voice throughout the paper is a reflection of how his thoughtful responses contributed to each theme. While an over-reliance on quotes can be seen as a limitation, I gave preference to the participant whose words most appropriately captured the them, thereby sacrificing diversity for resonance.