Critical Literature Review Essay on Nontraditional Veteran Students' Classroom Learning and Social Experiences in the Community College Classroom: Balancing the Transition Literature with a focus on Coping Strategies

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Abstract

This paper is a critical literature review essay that highlights how the existing body of veteran educational transition literature severely lacks research on "coping strategies" for veteran students experiencing negative social and academic situations as they transition from war into the conventional college or university setting. The essay highlights major social and academic issues, which veteran students transitioning into the academy commonly experience such as frustration with traditional college peers, isolation and alienation in the classroom and on campus, poor academic progression, lack of instructor support, as well as discrimination of gender and sexual orientation. Moreover, the essay asserts that the current body of veteran student transition literature tends to only "inform" of these issues, but fail to illustrate how the veteran student can effectively respond to and eliminate these issues.

Keywords: Veteran,Transition, Coping, Anxiety, Emotional, Civilian, Community, Combat

1.Introduction

Veteran's transition experience upon entering civilian life is a topic that has intrigued professional postsecondary educators, business professionals, families, and members of the general community for decades. Many people desire an authentic psychological and emotional analysis of not only a veteran's successful transition experiences including cohesive family and educational integration, and strong career building skills within civilian life, but also of the conventional struggles that veteran's encounter upon entering civilian life. Combat veterans frequently struggle with anxiety issues as a result of the highly graphic and violent experiences endured while in the military, poor social skills, and they also lack the professional development skills needed to acquire cutting-edge careers in the workforce. These weaknesses and social struggles often lead the nontraditional veteran student to the community college setting in an effort to begin not only an assimilation into the social norms of civilian life, but to ultimately undergo an educational transformation that will enhance their marketability with diverse professional fields. Although veteran educational transition is an important issue within the higher education arena, there is a gap in the field in this area in regard to how veterans survive their educational transition and how they effectively overcome common social and educational obstacles that emerge within the postsecondary setting. Veteran transition literature addressing the expectations of veterans entering the community college setting, and how to deal with poor academic and social experiences that are frequently encountered in the college setting is severely limited. Kim (2002) states, "Given the degree of diversity within the community college student population, institutions must have a clear understanding of the challenges that their students face as well as ways to address these issues through programs and policies" (p. 74). Little is known about the academic expectations and social experiences that nontraditional veteran students bring with them to campus (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Cantrell & Dean, 2005; & Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). The current body of literature lacks discussion of the emotional and psychological impact of these experiences or coping strategies. In regard to professional research, nontraditional veteran college students have received some attention; however, more research has focused on traditional nontraditional students (Cavote, 2006; & Kasworm, 1980). The references utilized for this review include books, doctoral dissertations, master's theses, and several scholarly articles, which clearly illuminate how the veteran educational transition body of literature is very unbalanced.

These references clearly show how there is a need for literature that will give veteran students insight on how to effectively cope with discouraging or negative situations upon transitioning into the higher education setting. Dahan (2008) states in her master's thesis that, "25.5% of undergraduate veteran students report having a negative experience" (p. 48). Moreover, the references also illustrate how the body of transition literature is heavily focused on the community college setting, and vaguely on the higher education setting, which could encompass a variety of adult education environments. Considering the many "isolated" negative academic and social experiences that veterans encounter on campus, the literature should better address specific coping strategies in response to these incidents. Considering many veterans eventually transfer to the four-year institution, there is a need for an expansion of the literature focusing on conflict coping strategies as the university space is also associated with academic and social conflicts, and difficulties which highly contrast with the community college setting.

The overall context of the problem is that the body of transition literature does not present detailed accounts of how veterans emotionally and psychologically cope with negative academic and social experiences. The goal of this study is to add information to the existing body of literature that focuses on how veteran students cope with negative academic and social conflicts. This addition to the body of literature will educate other veteran students transitioning into higher education about possible conflicts, and how to deal with them.

2. Review of the Literature and Research Problem

The existing body of literature severely lacks research on "coping" strategies for veterans who endure negative academic and social experiences within the college setting. DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008) present the personal account of an irritated Marine student who transitioned into the college classroom only to become highly angered, and confused with the extreme level of immaturity exhibited by his younger, more traditional classmates: "Most students kind of whine over nothing. They don't really know what it is to have a hard time [. . .] They don't have people screaming at them to get things done at three in the morning. They sit in a sheltered dorm room and do homework. It's not too hard. You hear people complaining and you're just like, why are you complaining?" (p. 87).

This example illustrates how traditional college students expose veteran students to high levels of immaturity in the classroom. Clearly, this veteran student is highly frustrated with the lack of respect for education and work ethic that his younger college peers are exhibiting. This article fails to discuss how this veteran student emotionally and psychologically coped with being exposed to this disrespect. This article presented the negative experience, but failed to present the soldier's response to the situation.

Moreover, Cook and Kim (2009); Hamrick and Rumann (2010); Lolatte (2010);and Rae (2009) interestingly mirror each other in their presentation of general transitional conflicts that veterans encounter such as disrespectful, immature traditional students, periods of emotional depression in the classroom, and awkward social skill, but vaguely discusses how the veteran handled these situations. These pieces of literature also lack specific examples of transition issues specifically associated with the university space.

In regard to isolation, many veteran students at the university level encounter many administrative issues that cause them to feel very alienated from the traditional students on campus. There is a need for literature that not only "informs" of this problem, but also presents a solution to it. In her master's thesis, Dahan (2008) presents several administrative campus issues that undergraduate university students experienced at Rowan University that could result in a veteran student becoming highly discouraged to continue their education and maximize their academic potential. The two major issues were "the university's transfer policy penalized veteran students, and campus rules and regulations seemed to have been made for someone who is a traditional college student" (p. 34). These issues presented in the study are indeed significant and interesting data, but the study fails to illustrate how these students coped with these problems. What was the emotional and psychological experience, and response of this veteran student? The current body of transition literature needs to reflect answers to this type of question so that when other veteran students encounter these types of problems, they will have a realistic answer in the form of literature as a reference.

3. Informative Studies on Veteran Transition Experiences

The body of transition literature also presents many interesting informative studies related to veterans transitioning into higher education.

The literature of Ryan (2010); Grossman and Christensen (2008); and Hoshmand and Hoshmand (2009) present in-depth informative studies on the transitional experiences that veterans encounter such as poor social skills and experiences, academic struggles in the classroom, and feelings of anxiety. Regular communication and checking on student veterans progress toward degrees is essential in keeping our student veterans engaged in campus life and on track (Selber, 2009; Church, 2009; Justice, 1946; & Williamson, 1994). This author's primary point presented in their articles is that an aggressive monitoring of veteran's academic progress from the time of admission to graduation is the key to not only sustaining their academic success, but also maintaining current, innovative services that effectively foster their unique needs. As professionals in the field, we must continuously be asking ourselves how nontraditional veteran students are viewing their college experience and what lens they are viewing their experience through: "But what of college itself? How do the veterans like it? How well are they satisfied with the courses offered, the various requirements and prerequisites, the admission hurdles, the professors, the methods of instruction, material? "(Justice, 1946, p. 187).

In this passage, Justice is illuminating the questions that we as higher education professionals should firmly acknowledge regarding veteran's college transition experience. The answers to these types of questions can strongly determine not only the retention rate of veteran students, but also the emotional struggles that this particular student population frequently experience. These pieces of literature provide valuable insight to college and university faculty, staff, and administration as related to the many special needs related to veteran's transition experiences. Moreover, the above pieces of literature discusses the multifaceted challenges of military life and how these challenges call for multilevel strategies of prevention and intervention that will aid in the successful transition experience of veterans who are entering the college classroom. What we as civilians both in and outside of the education field must acknowledge is that the post-war integration into the college classroom is very gradual and cannot be rushed on any level In addition to being a strictly informative study on veteran transitional issues, an addendum to these studies presenting specific accounts of veteran's approaches to eliminating these negative transition experiences such as seeking special assistance or conference time with professors, the campus counseling center, the veteran's assistance center etc. would create a unique action oriented study (Vance & Miller, 2009; Sprangue, 2004; Smith, 1996; and Hughes, 1990). Many veteran students bring many health related issues with them into the classroom in addition to the academic and social issues (Darkins, 2008; Chao & Good, 2004; Kasworm& Pike, 1994; & Kirby, 2004). Therefore, literature that illustrates methods of dealing with these issues appears to be severely needed within the body of veteran transition literature as a whole.

4.Gender Discrimination among Female Veterans

Books written in the area of veteran higher education transition are minimal. Upon searching the library catalogue and Google Scholar, the most significant book located is entitled *California's Women Veterans: The Challenges and Needs of those who Served* by Lisa K. Foster. Although this book presents valuable information regarding the struggles that women veterans endure such as employment and pay discrimination compared to their male veteran counterparts, difficulty assimilating back into family and civilian life upon return from deployments, and lack of respect for their military service, the book lacks information on educational transition issues that female veterans are likely to face, or how to effectively cope with these issues. Foster (2009) quotes one of her respondents in expressing "sometimes I think we don't get the respect, recognition and services as men because many view women – especially younger women – as not being a person who could be a veteran. People just don't ask or outreach like they do with men, even other women" (p. 24). As gender discrimination and the other transition issues that Foster presents in her book are certainly important issues related to transitioning into the civilian world, she does not take an educational angle to her arguments, or present the coping responses to these issues. The literature needs to reflect the academic and social challenges that the female veteran faces upon transitioning into college as female veterans often experience an increased level of difficulty in terms of transition than their male counterparts:

The transitions that male veterans face when enrolling in college are likely facilitated by the presence on campus of male veterans among faculty and staff. Female veterans on campus are less likely than male veterans to find same-gender role models [. . .] When women veterans come to campus and face issues associated with establishing an identity, they will need to be able to find another whom to connect. (Baechtold, & De Sawal, 2009, p. 40)

This passage clearly indicates how there is a need for the literature to better reflect the emotional and educational struggles that both male and female veterans experience, and coping strategies for these particular struggles. Moreover, as with Rumann's dissertation, a coping addendum would have enhanced the value of the text in terms of presenting action oriented methods to overcome, or cope with these emotionally and psychologically traumatic transition issues that veterans struggle with.

Ly-Turnbull (2010) illustrates how veteran's college choice is frequently limited due to society's intense idealization of the community college setting:

The vast majority of veterans interviewed in this study stated they were [. . .] heavily socialized by military supervisors and education officials who encourage [. . .] the collection of miscellaneous credit hours rather than actual degree attainment, and encourage community college attendance. (p. 3)

This piece of literature clearly confirms the need to illuminate the four-year university setting as a veteran friendly environment where veteran transitional issues can be successfully coped with, and an upper level education can be attained through effective coping strategies in response to campus conflicts. Higher education does not have to stop at the community college for veterans. There is a need to balance the body of veteran educational transition literature and ultimately illuminate the four-year university setting as a welcoming and attainable goal, rather than an environment of fear and isolation for U.S. veterans desiring a higher education.

5. Conclusion

Upon reviewing the above pieces of veteran transition literature, I found that the primary focus is on evaluating the college advisor's ability to respond to the psychological, emotional, social, and educational needs of veterans. Dahan (2008) presents data "relating how well university advisors responded to student's needs. The survey asked whether an academic advisor remembered what was discussed in sessions and whether they would seek out answers for the students" (p. 48). There is also a very weak focus or lack thereof on the university setting regarding transition conflicts, and a strong prioritization on the awareness of community college personnel. Rumann (2010) presents a study that "can be used to inform community college faculty, staff, and administrators [. . .] about the transition experience of veterans returning to a community college" (p. 4). The current body of literature also illustrates veteran's negative classroom experiences such as being pressured by the professor to discuss sensitive issues. DiRamio et al (2008) and Cantrell and Dean (2005) present studies illustrating how veterans do not feel comfortable being called on in class because of their service experience. Faculty members who insisted on violating anonymity could make the veteran attempting to blend in feel uncomfortable. The primary problem with this information is that the literature does not present effective coping strategies for the common academic and social struggles that veteran students face upon entering the higher education setting. Conducting a study on the specific personal accounts of how veteran students respond emotionally, psychologically, and professionally to their campus difficulties with a direct focus on the university setting will close this gap in the literature. New questions that emerged from this review are (1) how would literature focusing on veteran coping strategies favor the retention rate of future veterans transitioning into the classroom? (2) Is there a fear among student veterans to seek campus counseling or other assistance with their conflicts? The body of literature should not only inform the educational community and other students of common transitional issues that veteran students experience, but rather, present both the problem and a viable solution or coping strategy in response to the problem. The creation of literature of literature of this nature would serve as a veteran conflict survival guide for veterans entering the university setting, and would potentially raise retention rates within this student group.

As a community college and university-level English instructor, I have had many veteran students enter into my classroom exhibiting varying degrees of social anxiety, isolation from other peers, and an overall detachment for the college community as a whole. Literature focusing on how to recognize and cope with these issues would provide insight into how to proceed in initiating counseling referrals to the veteran student. This would aid in fostering their academic, social, and emotional success. Ultimately as adult educators, we must never lose sight of the diverse range of students in our classrooms and the multifaceted challenges they bring to the classroom with them. We must continuously practice a "proactive" approach in responding to possible academic, social, and psychological challenges that can deter the learning process. As the literature review conducted above has clearly indicated, a "coping focused" body of literature, as an addition to the existing body of literature would be a major step in materializing this proactive response to the issues that veterans bring with them into the classroom.

Moreover, instructors will gain a window of insight into dealing with veteran academic and social transition issues, and also other veteran students entering into the academy as well.

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