

An Ethnography of Student Veterans: Investigating the Experience of Veterans Transitioning From the Military to Academia

1. Abstract

As American involvement in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan concludes, increasing numbers of veterans are utilizing their military education benefits and attending college. Many unique challenges face veterans attempting to re-socialize into civilian society, a world they often no longer recognize (Shay, 2002). Though many veterans cite the desire to attain the resources necessary to pursue secondary education as a primary reason for their decision to enlist in the military, veterans are finding that civilian institutions like colleges and universities seem unprepared to handle the challenges that arise with the growing student veteran population (Moore, 2012; Zwerdling, 2012). An ethnographic investigation at UNC Asheville reveals that veterans on its campus comprise a distinct diasporic culture, estranged from their classmates and the traditional pedagogical approaches implemented in the classroom. Visiting other college campuses and conducting an ethnographic investigation of student veterans at those campuses will give greater insight to our understanding of student veteran culture, clarify the extent to which the issues described are unique to veterans attending UNC Asheville in comparison to student veterans pursuing higher education everywhere, and provide tools and information necessary to properly address this developing situation.

2. Description of Research

This is a continuation of a research project that began in the spring semester 2013. The purpose of this project is to study how veterans of the military are being integrated into college classrooms. With recent enhancements in veterans' education benefits and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq drawing to a close, thousands of veterans are going back to school to utilize their GI Bill benefits (Mulrine, 2009). Academia is comprised of an established culture with many norms and rituals. Likewise, veterans of the military and specifically the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan also comprise a distinct culture that is becoming a significant part of the student population. This study utilizes ethnographic methods to examine how veterans adapt to the collegiate environment as well as how academia reacts to the student veteran presence. Thus far, the research I have been conducting has consisted of interviews with student veterans at UNC Asheville (this research was IRB approved before any interviews were conducted) and observations from meetings from the new student veteran organization at UNCA. Every participant reads and signs an IRB approved consent form and an audio recording is made of the interviews. Weekly, I submit a paper to my advisor detailing the research that I have conducted during the previous week. Thus far, interviews have been demonstrating that student veterans at UNC Asheville experience a sense of alienation and are struggling with adaptation to the collegiate environment, which is consistent with studies that demonstrate that modern military veterans are suffering from a host of issues concerning their adjustment to civilian life (Wood,2012; Kingkade,2013).

Several themes have been materializing consistently in discussions with different student veterans. Difficulty obtaining VA benefits is widely reported (Rieckhoff, 2013). This creates a situation where veterans are intimidated and frustrated with the college experience before they even begin. All veterans that I have spoken to thus far has expressed that they find it difficult to fit in at UNC Asheville. Factors such as age (the majority of veterans utilizing GI Bill benefits are older than traditional college students; some are much older) and economic background (many veterans are first generation college students and feel that they grew up in a lower social class than their classmates at UNC Asheville) contribute to the sense of otherness expressed by the student veterans I have been speaking with (Horton, 2012; Johnson, 2010). Enhancing these quantifiable factors are several more subtle observations that the UNC Asheville student veterans describe. Among these is a repeated theme of veterans feeling stigmatized by their classmates. These student veterans claim that UNC Asheville is very forward and outspoken with the intent of cultivating a diversity-friendly environment but they feel that the university's concept of diversity does not extend to include their demographic. Some of these veterans maintain conservative political views, which they claim are openly mocked in their classes by students and faculty, particularly with regard to the religion that many of the veterans I have spoken to identify with. Student veterans also report that class discussions (particularly with regard to foreign policy) can often include disparaging comments concerning members of the United States Armed Forces and that they are spoken with unawareness and disregard towards the possibility that there may be veterans in the classroom. They express that they sometimes feel like an invisible and/or unappreciated minority. Several student veterans that I have

spoken with have not only participated in combat but have also been wounded in action. The rate of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder among these veterans is very high and can create special needs among those suffering from it (Alvarez, 2008). Some veterans have reported that many situations that can “trigger” their symptoms are present at UNC Asheville, such as crowded classrooms and subject material discussed during class. Again, student veterans feel that the university is unaware of their presence and find the campus to be an unwelcoming place for them. Some have expressed a temptation to quit, either due to their discomfort in the UNC Asheville environment or the simple inability to adapt to civilian life. This is very disturbing considering that many of these veterans enlisted and served primarily for the education benefits that they perceived as their only viable gateway to higher education and social mobility (Zwerdling, 2012). The severity and consistency of what is being reported by the veterans invites further exploration of the scope of the problem that they are facing. Initially an ethnography of student veterans at UNC Asheville, the findings of this study have revealed the value of extending the research to other universities to investigate the extent to which the patterns observed at UNC Asheville are present at other campuses. I have communicated with UNC Chapel Hill, Western Carolina University, University of Tennessee Knoxville, University of Virginia, and Duke University regarding researching student veterans at their campuses. This would serve the dual purpose of expanding the scope of the fieldwork location and the number of participants in the study group while also providing the opportunity to observe how differing demographics, locations, environments, and pedagogical methods affect the student veteran population. Doing this will enhance the depth of the ethnography’s study of the student veteran diaspora and could potentially set the stage for addressing the challenges that they face.

3. Time Period Spring Semester, 2013 (in progress): UNC Asheville student veteran interviews and recruitment of participants for the summer study. **Summer Semester, 2013:** Travel and interviews with student veterans at other college campuses. **Fall Semester, 2013:** Data analysis, transcription, and ethnographic writing. **Spring Semester, 2014:** Presentation and publication

4. Budget During the summer of this project, I will not be taking my normal load of college classes. Typically, I maintain “full time” status as a student. As a veteran utilizing GI Bill benefits, I stopped working to go to school full time and focus on my studies and receive a stipend for living expenses based on the number of credit-hours I am taking. I will thus request the maximum \$1500 to cover living expenses while focusing on this research. I plan to travel to multiple universities in the southeast to meet with veteran students, including but not limited to: UNC Chapel Hill, Duke University, University of Tennessee Knoxville, Western Carolina University, and University of Virginia. The cost of travel and lodging will likely exceed the maximum \$1000 available to cover that need. If this occurs, I will pay the difference from my own funds. Stipend: \$1500 Travel/Lodging: \$1000 Total: \$2500

5. Additional Funding

I am not seeking additional funding for this research.

6. Resources

Alvarez, Lizette. 2008. "Nearly a Fifth of War Veterans Report Mental Disorders, a Private Study Finds." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 18 Apr. Web. 04 Apr. 2013.

Horton, Alex. 2012. "Lonely Men on Campus: Student Veterans Struggle to Fit In." *The Atlantic*. N.p., 28 Aug. Web. 04 Apr. 2013.

Johnson, Jenna. 2010. "How Can Colleges Help Student Veterans?" *Campus Overload* -. N.p., 8 Nov. Web. 04 Apr. 2013.

Kingkade, Tyler. 2013. "GI Bill: No Data On Graduation Rates Confuses Program's Benefit, Efficiency." *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 10 Jan. Web. 04 Apr. 2013.

Moore, Ellen. 2012. "From Combat to College: Student Veterans in Academic ‘Contact Zones.’" *Institute for the Study of Societal Issues*. University of California, Berkeley.

Mulrine, Anna. 2009. "New Benefits Help Veterans Go to College." US News. U.S. News & World Report, 03 Aug. Web. 04 Apr. 2013.

Rieckhoff, Paul. 2013. "U.S. Shamefully Slow to Help Vets." CNN. Cable News Network. 19 Mar. Web. 04 Apr. 2013.

Shay, Jonathan. *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming* (New York: Scribner, 2002), 20.

Wood, David. 2012. "Veterans' College Drop-Out Rate Soars." The Huffington Post. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 25 Oct. Web. 03 Apr. 2013.

Zwerdling, Daniel. 2012. "Program Teaches Vets How To Survive The Classroom." NPR. NPR, 11 June. Web. 04 Apr. 2013.

7. Publication outlet For publication, the UNC Asheville Journal of Undergraduate Research is anticipated. This research may be presented at the Southern Anthropological Society's 2014 meeting in Cherokee as well as the UNC Asheville Undergraduate Research Symposium in Spring 2014.

8. Human Subject Form (IRB Approval Letter Attached)