

# Ten Things You Should Know About Today's Student Veteran

by *Alison Lighthall*

**W**ith our military out of Iraq, and funding for global military operations on the decline, thousands of newly discharged men and women are trying to figure out “What’s next?” Most of our Soldiers, Marines, Airmen, and Sailors joined the military before their 21st birthday, and it’s often the only job they’ve ever held. While it’s true they’ve received extensive training during their years of service, it’s often fairly narrow in scope and not immediately translatable to civilian employment.

The answer for a record number of new veterans is higher education, for several reasons. Many joined the military with the ultimate goal of college, and the two G.I. Bills can help them afford an education that would otherwise be out of reach. Others are now more worldly and mature, and can see the value in a higher education that their younger, less experienced selves never saw. Still others use college as a kind of buffer between the highly structured military life they’ve led and our “every-man-for-himself” civilian world.

But, the transition from the intensity of military life to a more self-sufficient civilian life can be overwhelming. In some ways, it’s similar to the experiences of laid-off workers: both groups may feel disoriented and suffer losses of identity and work-related friendships. But former military personnel report feeling not just disoriented, but deeply alienated from the rest of America; not just sad over the loss of friendships, but devastated over the loss of brothers and sisters; not just a tem-

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porary destabilizing of identity, but a complete identity crisis.

Some veterans hope college will ease their discomfort. But whether they enter a small community college or a large state university, new challenges await. On top of the usual new student fears, they may also have a spouse or young family to care for and support. They may have new cognitive difficulties or fears of being singled out because they fought in an unpopular war. A supportive and informed faculty, therefore, is the key to these veterans' success.

You may not realize how many student veterans are on campuses these days. According to *Completing The Mission: A Pilot Study of Veteran Student Progress*

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*Toward Degree Attainment in the Post 9/11 Era*, by 2011, more than 924,000 veterans had used the benefits offered through the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill.<sup>1</sup> The report, prepared by the Pat Tillman Foundation and Operation College Promise, goes on to say that the number is rising as more troops are discharged into a dismal job market.<sup>2</sup> At George Mason University in northern Virginia, for instance, the number of student veterans has soared from 840 in 2009 to 1,575 in early 2011.<sup>3</sup> At Wayne State University in Detroit, the administration expects these numbers to double in the next year, from approximately 500 to 1,000.<sup>4</sup>

Getting through the dizzying, sometimes maddening maze of Veterans Affairs paperwork may be the biggest obstacle that student veterans face in getting a higher education, but it is certainly not the only one. Issues like blast-related reading and hearing impairments, or feelings of intense discomfort when a well-meaning professor puts them on the spot to discuss his/her world views, or their struggles to manage intrusive memories of deployment while sitting still in a windowless classroom, can be incredibly challenging and fatiguing to these men and women. Making it worse, they persistently resist asking for help to retain their self-belief of being “bullet-proof.”

In my eight years of working with our military citizens, and having been one myself, I've found that when college faculty and staff understand a few core principles about student veterans, the experience is much more positive for everybody in the classroom. Here, in David Letterman style, is my top-ten list of principles for working with student veterans:

***10. Student veterans are a highly diverse group—as diverse as America itself.***

There are no generalizations that are remotely accurate about this group, other than their common hope that more education will make their lives and their fam-

ilies' lives better. Returning military personnel come from all over, and are a rainbow of colors, shapes, religions, sexual orientation, and political views. It will benefit everyone if you open yourself to the enriching experience of listening closely to what they reveal about themselves and their lives.

***9. Veterans do not see themselves as victims. Ever.***

Victims are people who feel no control over their lives and perceive themselves as being at the mercy of others. Even when student veterans are psychologically struggling or physically wounded, they see themselves as powerful warriors. This

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is part of the reason it's difficult for them to seek appropriate accommodations in the classroom. How can they acknowledge the change in their functioning as a disability and still maintain their identity as a strong soldier living by the Warrior Ethos? Framing these accommodations as "adaptations" that many people need, not just veterans, helps this internal struggle. And, once they can accept the adjustments, academic life often gets significantly easier.

***8. They can feel very alone on campus.***

When a service member is discharged from the military, it's aptly termed "separation" and it comes with all the heartbreak and disorientation that being torn from one's tribe brings. They just spent the last several years inextricably tied to some type of social system, whether it was a brigade, battalion, company, platoon, squad, team, or just one on one with a battle buddy. During those years, solitude was rare. Now, suddenly they're no longer attached to those systems, and the feeling of vulnerability can be terrifying.

The loss of friendships, purpose, identity, structure, and income is enough to push most people to their limits. Throw in an unfamiliar social system that bears no resemblance to the military, has no clear chain of command, and is filled with many students and faculty who can't even imagine the student veterans' experiences, and you have a deeply alienating environment for many of them.

Typically, student veterans are also older and more experienced than their freshman peers, which helps them keep things in perspective and not sweat the small stuff. They can, and do, manage huge amounts of pain, both physical and mental, without complaint. But consequently, they also bristle at trivial matters called "crises" by others, and scorn the frequent self-absorption of their peers. Often they see most civilian students as not emotionally strong enough to be their



"War," from the installation, *24 Words: 1 Year*, 2003, is a gelatin silver print by Linda Kroff, professor and program coordinator of creative photography at California State University, Fullerton.



friends, and so the student veterans usually isolate themselves in school.

Connecting student veterans can effectively ease this isolation, and it's especially helpful if connections can be made between new veterans and those who have successfully navigated a semester or two. Incoming student veterans need role modeling and guidance. They need to be reassured that, yes, school is a very different kind of battlefield and it requires an entirely different skill set and mental map. They need to hear, "I've made it work and you can too." From a shared sense of alienation, they bond together, and that bonding then mitigates their alienation.

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***7. They are often unaware of their own mild traumatic brain injuries.***

Almost every Marine I've ever known, and most of the frontline soldiers I've ever talked to, have experienced a significant explosion. But if it wasn't their truck that blew up or their limb lost, they often don't see it as their experience.

When a bomb detonates, its concussive impact on nearby soldiers is massive. If it weren't for the brain's remarkable plasticity and the indomitable human spirit, these men and women would be mostly incapable of learning, much less taking on a college education. Difficulties with memory, attention and concentration, as well as mental processing, abstract reasoning, and executive functioning, are common problems for student veterans.

But there are ways to assist your student veterans, and some of the most common strategies will not only assist them, but all of the students in your classroom. For example, make and share recordings of your classroom lectures and discussions, and allow note taking on laptops so that students can review and process the classroom material in a less sensory-stimulating environment. Wear a microphone to enhance auditory clarity, and make sure that class videos are captioned. Also try to use texts that can be obtained electronically, in case the student needs the text to be read aloud. Posting your notes ahead of time will help the student veteran better prepare, and allowing students to use a ruler during exams will help them keep their place. If they're highly anxious during exams, it may be helpful to give them a different time and place. Make yourself available for out-of-class office hours.

***6. There are three things you should never say to a student veteran (but they still hear them every day).***

"These wars were atrocities and a waste of human life," "I don't get why you're having so much trouble—you volunteered, right?" and worst of all, "Did you kill

anyone?" These comments do more than upset veterans; they wound the hearts of men and women who are already overburdened with sorrow. For this reason, I believe faculty's opinions about the military or recent wars are best kept out of the classroom. You may not always be able to prevent a student from saying something hurtful, but you can model awareness of other viewpoints, and explain how these comments might be hurtful.

#### ***5. Female veterans suffer deeply, and almost always in silence.***

While women make up about 15 percent of today's military, it's still very much

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a man's domain—something female service personnel were acutely aware of every day we were in uniform.<sup>5</sup> Women had to do it better, faster, and smarter than the guys to earn their respect. And we had to have a better sense of humor and a stronger sense of self to survive their constant covert, and sometimes overt, tests of our emotional and physical strength and trustworthiness.

But more insidious, and infinitely more damaging, is the persistent sexual harassment and sexual assault of female soldiers. The Veteran Administration estimates that at least 22 percent of females are sexually assaulted during their time in service.<sup>6</sup> It's important to understand that when a female service member experiences a sexual assault from a comrade, she experiences it as incest. After all, this is her military family, and these men are her brothers in arms. This physical and psychological breach causes immense damage to the assaulted soldier, who often feels she must keep it a secret to maintain her own safety and "family" unity. Only when she gets home can she begin the long process of fully untangling this very complex experience and all the emotions that go with it. Be aware of these potential issues, and follow your school's guidelines for referral if it comes up with a student veteran in your classroom.

#### ***4. They often want to go back to the war zone.***

Combat veterans often miss the intense closeness they had with their comrades, and being in an environment where everyone understands them, where they're doing a job they're trained for and competent at, where everything they do matters. As the saying goes, "War may be hell, but home ain't exactly heaven either." Often, returning veterans feel guilty about surviving when friends have not. Often, they want to go back, regain that closeness, and "make things right."

Deploying downrange, or going outside the green zone and into the raw world

of unpredictable violence, even once, is a huge experience. Doing it over and again adds up to a set of experiences that has no civilian equal. It is not “like” anything else. It’s terrifying and thrilling, heartbreaking and empowering, destructive and constructive, all at once, and it is intense all the time. When veterans get home, not only do they feel alone and that their lives suddenly have less meaning, they also feel bored. Facing death every day made them feel completely alive, but being bored makes them feel dead. It takes quite a while to throttle down and adapt to the lower level of adrenaline that civilian life calls for. That’s part of the reason so many discharged soldiers go into law enforcement or engage in extreme sports.

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They’re trying to experience that same adrenaline rush that made them feel so alive before.

So if they write an essay about how much they enjoyed being deployed or how they wish they could go back, take it in stride and respect the process they’re going through. I’ve had aging Vietnam veterans tell me that if they could deploy to Afghanistan today and “help these young soldiers,” they’d go in a heartbeat. Once a warrior, always a warrior.

### ***3. Combat trauma is an injury, not a mental illness.***

Witnessing your best friend get blown apart by an improvised explosive device (IED) is a massive shock to the amygdala, the brain’s emotional command center. And the emotional shock is just one component to the injury. The subsequent events and bursts of emotions that swiftly follow an attack of that magnitude will flood the brain with chemicals and commands that leave behind physical imprints that can cause long-term physical, psychological, and emotional distortions.

Healing often can’t begin until the service member is no longer receiving signals of danger and the brain’s chemistry begins to normalize. Sometimes, it takes months, other times, years. But adaptation and recovery are well within the human capacity, and that fact that should be reinforced to the student veteran at every opportunity. For every label they are saddled with (“You have PTSD,” “You are disabled,” etc.), we should counter with what traumatic brain injury expert Dr. (and Colonel) Heidi Terrio calls, “the expectation of recovery.” It is that expectation of recovery that provides hope. And hope is the antidote to giving up on life.

### ***2. To succeed, veterans need your understanding, compassion and respect.***



Because the vast majority of Americans choose not to join one of the branches of the military, our student veterans are surrounded by people who have no experience, or context, for understanding their experiences. To many of them, the student veteran's behavior may be confusing, inexplicable, or even frightening.

Because of anxiety or injury-related disorganization, they may show up late or even miss a class. Or they may come 15 minutes early so they can find the perfect desk that allows them a full view of the room, reducing their sense of physical threat. During class, they may have difficulty sitting still or staying focused, and they may need to leave the room to compose themselves. After class, still strug-


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gling to process the taught information and skills, they may be silent or stoic when they need to be reaching out for guidance and support. Regardless of how it looks, what you're seeing is almost never meant to be disrespectful to you. Your student veterans value and honor authority figures; being deliberately disrespectful would go against their military training and experience. Understanding that their actions are not personal, reaching out to them with compassion and respect, accommodating their individual learning needs, and most importantly, seeing them as people who chose to serve our country and who have endured burdens beyond anything we can imagine, could make all the difference to that student veteran. It might even mean the difference between him or her finding success in life, or getting lost, jobless, and homeless.

### ***1. Student veterans are one of America's greatest untapped human resources.***

They are emotionally mature, goal-oriented, mission-driven, experienced leaders. They work tirelessly to achieve their objectives and look for ways to make meaningful contributions. They are self-sufficient; they will only ask questions when they cannot find the answers themselves. They not only understand the concept of sacrifice for the greater good, they've lived it. They are respectful and protective of those around them. They think globally and bypass most things trivial or trendy.

In short, they are the kind of role models we need on our campuses, and graduating to lives of fulfillment in our workplaces. With your support, their academic success can allow them to become some of America's strongest, most insightful leaders. We owe them our gratitude, of course. But more importantly, we owe them a chance to have meaningful new careers and fulfilling civilian lives, from which we will all richly benefit. 

## ENDNOTES

1. These data are taken from U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. "Summary of Veterans Benefits, FY2000 to FY 2011."
2. Lang and Powers, *Completing the Mission: A Pilot Study of Veteran Student Progress Toward Degree Attainment in the Post 9/11 Era*.
3. Boodman, "Veterans Find That Their Transition from Combat to College Can Be Difficult."
4. Wayne State's numbers are approximate and were reported to me by the university's provost.
5. According to the Women's War Memorial, 14.6 percent of the Active Duty force, 19.5 percent of the Reserves, and 15.5 percent of the National Guard are women.
6. The statistics on rape in the military are extremely murky; it's impossible to give one number on which everyone can agree. The difficulty is due to massive under-reporting, estimated by studies done outside the military as being 85 percent (i.e., only 15 percent of all military sexual assaults get reported). Some of the data are drawn from women who are being seen by the VA, which, by definition, is going to be a skewed. The VA reports that 20 percent of women surveyed admit to military sexual trauma. Therefore, it seems likely that 50 to 75 percent of all military women are assaulted, given that 85 percent don't report.
7. Terrio et al., "Traumatic Brain Injury Screening: Preliminary Findings in a US Army Brigade Combat Team."

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