

Exploring Significant Factors that Impact the Academic Success of Student Veterans in Higher Education

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The purpose of this research study was to explore the college experience of student veterans and identify ways to help them succeed academically. This study sought to identify factors that predict the academic success of veterans in their first year of college. The researcher examined veterans' experiences in college, inside and outside the classroom, in order to identify which engagement activities, if any, influenced their first-term cumulative GPA. The researcher found seven variables to be statistically significant predictors of student veterans' first-term GPA: (a) race, (b) the number of credit hours taken, (c) talking to faculty members about career aspirations, (d) receiving oral feedback from a faculty member about academic performance, (e) attending events on campus, (f) exercising or participating in physical activities, and (g) time spent commuting to class. Increased veteran enrollment has merited examination of the challenges student veterans have encountered at higher education institutions. This study adds to the limited body of knowledge on this topic and contributes to a future plan for the successful education of veterans who attend college.

INTRODUCTION

Data suggest that a substantial number of returning veterans will seek a degree in higher education in the upcoming decades (Griffin & Gilbert, 2012). There is a lack of understanding within the larger US society about the unique needs of veterans in higher education, and veterans, as a group, have earned fewer and fewer college degree (Cook & Kim, 2009). According to Herrmann, Raybeck, and Wilson (2008), a great need currently exists for colleges and universities around the nation to become aware of the challenges veterans face during their first year of college and university life. Colleges and universities across the United States have been seeking creative solutions to improve the overall success of veterans, and to remove unnecessary educational obstacles to enhance their educational experience. One such solution has been Project SERV (Supporting Education for the Returning Veterans), a program administered from Cleveland State University that helps veterans overcome the many transitional challenges they experience in their first year of college. Other colleges and universities have addressed these transitional issues by becoming members of the Student Veterans of America. As chapter members, institutions establish student veterans groups on campus to help create a warm, positive environment for veterans. From coordinating campus activities to providing networking opportunities, these groups have

been influential in helping student veterans adjust to their new environment, while also achieving academic success (Talking Stick, 2011).

Limited research has been conducted on the veteran population to understand the factors that influence their academic success and other information specific to veteran involvement in higher education (Cook & Kim, 2009).

The purpose of this study was to identify factors that predict the academic success of student veterans in their first year of college. The researcher explored veterans' experiences in college, inside and outside the classroom, in order to discover which engagement activities, if any, influence their first-term cumulative GPA.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Faculty members, staff members, and veterans all over the country have expressed concern about veterans' academic progress once they enroll in college. According to Cook and Kim (2009), student veterans have struggled in college, even though students with military backgrounds know how to focus, work, and succeed.

Addressing student veterans' concerns at higher education institutions better serves society. Higher education is a helpful transitional mechanism for student veterans as they transition from soldier to civilian. By providing student veterans with educational tools and transitional experiences through higher education, their lives could be improved, and appreciation for student veteran transitions through education can be demonstrated in the process.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Today's Student Veteran

Researchers have provided warnings that colleges and universities have been unprepared to wholly assist student veterans today. DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2007) noted the general lack of support for college veterans both at the governmental and institutional levels. According to Eddy, Burnett, Spaulding and Murphy (1997), student health centers, unprepared to support the mental health of student veterans, may also be ill-equipped to meet student veterans' unique medical needs. The initiative of 25 student-formed veterans' organizations to create the Student Veterans of America organization is a potential indicator that student veterans feel they need something more from their respective institutions (Guiles, 2008a, 2008b; Pekow, 2008; Student Veterans of America Press Release, 2008). The organization has published a website replete with documents that have been designed to help veterans manage the transition back to college (Student Veterans of America, 2008b, 2008c), as well as resources for campus administrators (Student Veterans of America, 2008a). Since the Vietnam War, leaders and scholars in higher education have recognized problematic issues facing student veterans--especially issues that represent a concern to higher education professionals. Scholars and administrators have recognized the unique transitions student veterans undergo when returning to college (DiRamio et al., 2007; DiRamio et al., 2008; Jackson & Sheehan, 2005; Livingston, 2008; Murt, 2006).

To support student veterans, it is important that faculty and staff members make a cogent effort to understand student veterans. Student veterans are students who experience many transitions--specifically, understanding the transitions of first-year students and military transitions are important in assisting this population.

Challenges Veterans Experience in Higher Education

Veterans encounter many obstacles to their education, such as lack of support services, administrative barriers, the inability to fit in with traditional college students, and difficulty transitioning from the structured military atmosphere to the often times less structured life of a civilian (Lewis, 2008; Lewis & Sokolow, 2008). Another educational obstacle that veterans encounter is cultural insensitivity, which was referred to by the Student Veterans Association (SVA) president of the University of Michigan, who

lamented that he stopped telling others he was a veteran after classmates asked him if he had killed anyone (Field, 2007; Lederman, 2008).

The bureaucracy involved in administering educational benefits can sometimes become an obstacle for veterans. Because veterans' benefits have undergone frequent changes, it has been difficult even for G.I. Bill experts to make sense of the complex regulations associated with the bill (Redden, 2008; Wasley, 2007). Likewise, many veterans have been confused about the most appropriate ways their benefits can be put to optimum use (Redden, 2008). In some cases, veterans have been provided incorrect information by the military about their education benefits upon completion of their service commitment (Wasley, 2007). Frustration with the financial aspects of education, coupled with the absence of psychological and emotional support, has resulted in decreases in retention and program completion among veterans. Alvarez (2008) stated that "many institutions have failed to make allowances for the soldiers' special circumstances or to promote themselves as veteran friendly" (p. 16). According to Herrmann, Raybeck and Wilson (2008), a common frustration among veterans is the "denial of academic credit for military training and experience that correspond[s] to the content of their college courses" (p. 4). Another obstacle identified by Herrmann et al. is the lack of orientation programs for veterans before college matriculation. Because veterans are usually older than traditional college freshman, and many are married (Herrmann et al.), it is important for institutions to consider veterans as a unique group of students.

Palm (2008) asserted that negative attitudes of college personnel have been a core obstacle for student veterans. For example, if the pervasive campus attitude is one of condescension, pretentious empathy, or pity toward veterans, then the outcome will not be positive. Likewise, if the expectation is that veterans will arrive on campus with more problems than any other cohort of students, then the obstacle is the expectation itself. Palm rightly stated that "the expectation that someone will behave badly can create a self-fulfilling prophecy" (p. 25). Jaschik (2008) supported Palm's contention, pointing out a common mistake made by professors confronted with academically underprepared students. He suggested that it is a mistake to treat the unprepared students with pity, disrespect, or to consider them academically incapable of improving. Regardless of students' academic history, professors should maintain high levels of expectations for unprepared students, since most students tend to respond to how they are treated and the expectations that are set for them. It is a mistake not to let students know that instructors expect their best effort, hard work, and to make a commitment to the class if they are behind.

Veterans, like any other student group, need support and early intervention. Higher education would be wise to focus on the needs of the veteran population, for fear that they lose a viable part of their potential student body.

Analytical Framework for Study

Two theories, Astin's Student Involvement Theory and Schlossberg's Transition Theory, and one model, Astin's I-E-O Model, provided an analytical framework for this study. The proposed study explored the influence of veteran involvement on their first-term cumulative GPA.

Schlossberg's transition theory is applicable when working with diverse and multicultural student populations, especially veterans. Practitioners working within the framework of this theory understand that students react and adapt differently to transitions at different points in life, and that everyone handles transitions in very different ways from one another.

Alexander Astin (1984) is the leading expert in student involvement theory in higher education. He has defined student involvement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that a student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 518). Astin has defined a highly involved student as one who "devotes considerable energy to studying, spends time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students" (p. 518). Astin noted that while motivation is important, the behavior of "being involved" is critical.

I-E-O Model

Astin's (1994) I-E-O Model served as the conceptual and data analysis framework for this study. The model helps explain, if any, that input and environmental variables have on an outcome variable of importance to the researcher. The I-E-O model was originally conceptualized to show the effects of college on undergraduate students, and this study examines the effect of involvement activities and relationships with faculty members and staff members on first-year student veterans' academic success, as measured by their first-term cumulative GPA.

Looking at the effects of the undergraduate experience on students, Astin (1994) utilized high school GPA and SAT/ACT scores, among other factors, as input variables. These variables were controlled in the data analysis to determine the degree to which they are able to predict students' success in college. This study also explored several additional input variables, including pre-college characteristics, such as age, branch of military, and years in service. This study differs greatly from Astin's original work in the number of input variables examined.

Astin's (1994) work tested the effects of student involvement, and whether certain involvement activities were significant predictors of retention and persistence through an undergraduate program of study. Through the Veteran's Academic Questionnaire, this study utilized many of the same environmental variables that Astin utilized at the undergraduate level. The I-E-O model has been used in other higher education contexts to study professional school students and faculty involvement (Barger, 2001; Gore, 2009).

Transition Theory

Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson (1997) (as cited in Livingston 2009) further explained the transition processes related to each segment of the model: (a) *moving in* constitutes an individual becoming increasingly familiar with norms and expectations, (b) *moving through* involves an individual relinquishing past roles, (c) *moving out* is a tenuous period where the individual may struggle to emotionally conceptualize the transition, and (d) *moving in* is the process of entering a new life phase. DiRamio et al. (2008) used Schlossberg's model of adult transitions in a study on student combat veterans. The researchers established a grounded theory utilizing the four segments of the model: moving in, moving through, moving out, and moving in, as developed by Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989). In the *moving in* phase, DiRamio et al. (2008) noted the motivations student veterans reported for joining the armed forces and student veterans' military activation and mobilization. The *moving through* phase consisted of student veterans' actual combat deployment. *Moving out* was characterized by student veterans' transitioning from deployment, coming home, and preparing to return to college. Finally, student veterans underwent the college transition in the *moving in* phase, as they gained familiarity with their institution by connecting with peers, faculty members, and services offered by the institution.

DiRamio et al. (2008) (as cited in Livingston, 2009) established a holistic model for assisting student veterans. The basis of this model was the need to track student veterans as they re-enrolled. The tracking of veterans allows student services to be synchronized for the student veteran population. The key components of the DiRamio et al. (2008) model included the following: (a) financial aid support, (b) counseling, (c) student organization involvement, (d) disability support, (e) academic advising, (f) faculty support, and (g) institutional research. Ideally, these services should operate in cooperation and conjunction with one another to wholly assist student veterans.

Schlossberg's (1984) original theory highlighted four types of transitions: (a) anticipated, (b) unanticipated, (c) chronic "hassles," and (d) nonevent. Anticipated transitions are those that individuals can prepare for, while unanticipated transitions are irregular and typically involve crises. Chronic "hassles" are detrimental to individuals' self-esteem and can prevent them from taking necessary steps to make a change (Schlossberg, 1984). Finally, a fourth type of transition may take the form of a non-event, or an anticipated transition that never occurred.

This study confirmed the assumptions that underlie these types of transition. The transition of matriculating/arriving to campus was an anticipated transition for student veterans. While some student veterans may experience minor difficulties acclimating to campus, most student veterans find the process

of transitioning relatively easy. The challenges that emerged following matriculation were most likely unanticipated and sometimes problematic. For example, student veterans are selective about the campus life activities in which they invest their time. They are older than non-veteran students, and therefore tend to have responsibilities outside of higher education that put constraints on their time.

Schlossberg (1984) explained that chronic “hassles” can prevent individuals from making a change. Student veterans in this study did not get involved on campus and seldom sought help and support from faculty, staff, and peers. Because student veterans were reluctant to seek support, it was exclusively their responsibility to change their situations. As a result, student veterans in this study did not enhance their relationships with administrators or peers. The researcher found nonevents to be closely related to changes in one’s roles/routines that occur due to a non-event transition. For example, student veterans come from the military, a structured environment, to college, a relatively unstructured environment. The difficult transition implies a sense of vulnerability in that the success of transition ultimately depends on the individual to adapt to a new system after being told what to do and how to do it for an extended timeframe.

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to identify factors that influence the academic success of veterans in their first year of college. The researcher explored veterans’ experiences in college, inside and outside the classroom, to identify which engagement activities, if any, influenced their first-term cumulative GPA.

This study used a quantitative, non-experimental design to examine the influence of demographic characteristics, between-college characteristics, academic involvements, faculty-to-student interactions, student-to-student interactions, and social involvements had on the academic success of first-year veterans. The researcher conducted a blocked form of stepwise regression analysis to determine which variables, if any, predicted the academic success of first-year veterans. The decision to utilize a quantitative study derived from the lack of research studies that have been conducted and a lack of knowledge pertaining to the research topic. The empirical investigation of this topic included statistical, mathematical, and computational techniques. The process of measurement was vital to this research because it provided the connection between empirical observations and mathematical expressions of quantitative relationships.

This study explored the influence of several independent variables, such as veterans’ background characteristics, self-reported gains in various intellectual and personal areas, feelings about the level of institutional support, their overall satisfaction with their institution and experiences to date, and involvement in activities.

The majority of the sample size in this study represents the population of 4,000 first-year veterans returning from military service and attending colleges and universities in the state of Ohio. The researcher created a questionnaire to collect data on demographic characteristics, between-college characteristics, academic involvements, faculty-to-student interactions, student-to-student interactions, and social involvements in an effort to explore first-year college veterans’ experiences.

Research Questions

This study addressed the following research questions:

RQ1: What demographic characteristics, if any, impact the academic success of first-year veterans?

RQ2: What between-college characteristics, if any, impact the academic success of first-year veterans?

RQ3: What academic involvements, if any, impact the academic success of first-year veterans?

RQ4: What faculty-to-student interactions, if any, impact the academic success of first-year veterans?

RQ5: What student-to-student interactions, if any, impact the academic success of first-year veterans?

RQ6: What co-curricular involvements, if any, impact the academic success of first-year veterans?

Discussion of the Findings

The regression analysis identified seven significant predictor variables that influence the first-term GPA of student veterans: (a) student veterans that self-identify as non-white, (b) the number of credit hours taken, (c) talking to faculty about career aspirations, (d) receiving oral feedback from a faculty member about academic performance, (e) attending events on campus, (f) exercising or participating in physical activities, and (g) time spent commuting to class.

Input Variables

Research Question 1: What demographic characteristics, if any, impact the academic success of first-year veterans?

The input variables of Block 1 were entered into the regression to determine whether any demographic characteristics impact academic success. The variables in Block 1 included age, race, gender, marital status, number of children, number of children living at home full time, high school degree attainment, high school GPA, branch of military, sub-branch Military Occupational Specialty (MOS), years of service, reason for leaving, rank at discharge, use of the GI Bill, and ROTC involvement. The race variable (non-white) emerged as a negative predictor of student veterans' academic success. This indicates that student veterans of color tend to have a lower GPA than do white student veterans attending a college or university.

Even though minority enrollments in higher education have been at an all-time high, the graduation rate for minorities has remained low. According to Aaronson, Fried, and Good (2012), African American college students tend to obtain lower grades than their White counterparts, even when they enter college with equivalent test scores. The results of this study suggest there are negative factors that influence non-White students' intellectual abilities and play a role in this underperformance. These socioeconomic factors include racial climate on campus, educational history, and finances. These factors can sometimes be perceived as psychological threats and impact minority students' "situational" and "self" resources (Schlossberg, Lynch and Chickering, 1989). Resources that consist of their past experiences, attitudes, and awareness of higher education, or lack thereof, could predict how student veterans cope with the complexities of campus climate. These factors could also in turn provoke responses that impair both academic performance and psychological engagement with their academics.

Steele (1997) pointed out that inadequate resources, few role models, and preparation disadvantages can make it more difficult to identify with academic domains. For example, the racial climate at some colleges and universities may influence their trust, their engagement with campus activities, and ultimately their GPA. If student veterans of color do not feel welcome, or if they experience perceived racial harassment or discrimination on campus, they may drop out or underperform. In other words, non-white student veterans may experience a greater likelihood of underperforming academically as a result of problems arising from isolation, alienation, and lack of support.

Another possible explanation of race as a negative predictor of student veterans' academic success is educational history and preparation. According to Venezia, Kirst, and Antonio (2004), many minority students who enroll in college have not been adequately prepared for college-level curriculum. Poor preparation in K-12 education has left many students with an insufficient academic foundation to succeed in college. This lack of preparation often leads to poor academic performance and frustration, which increases the likelihood that students will drop out.

According to Haycock (2001), another possible explanation of race as a negative predictor of student veterans' academic success is the large number of minority students who are concentrated in high-poverty schools that lack academic and financial resources and teachers who are inadequately prepared. Student veterans are interested in professional careers and higher education; they hold aspirations far greater than

those being advanced by educators and parents around them. When student veterans perceive little or limited support and sense barriers to desired goals, they are likely to fail. Many non-white student veterans enter college having had much different socialization experiences, including social discrimination, institutional discrimination, and inadequate preparation for higher education.

A third possible explanation of race as a negative predictor of student veterans' academic success includes cultural differences and financial difficulties. Because military members, as a whole, are more ethnically diverse and often come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds than the general population, they are more likely than other students to be the first in their family to attend college (Cook & Kim, 2009). Non-white students in college do not fare as well as other students in terms of persistence rates, academic achievement, postgraduate study, and overall psychosocial adjustments (Astin, 1982). As a result, non-White families may not possess the background or understanding to provide the necessary support and nurture minority student veterans' efforts to succeed in higher education.

Environmental Variables

Research Question 2: What institutional (between-college) characteristics, if any, impact the academic success of first-year veterans?

Region (institutions in Ohio), level (four-year versus two-year institution), and control (public institution versus private institution) characteristics for each school were grouped together in Block 2. The institutional control variable (public institution) was found to be a significant negative predictor of veterans' academic success. This finding indicates that student veterans who attended a public college or university tend to have lower GPAs than do student veterans who attended a private institution.

Institutional Size

There are many differences between public and private colleges (Bowling Green State University, Ohio State University at Lima, and the College of Mount St. Joseph); however, the results of this study indicated that the size of the institution plays a critical role in helping student veterans succeed. Even though state schools seem to be affordable, are highly ranked, and offer an undergraduate academic experience comparable to private schools, some factors negatively influence academic success. State universities, unlike their private counterparts, are funded by the state government. The health of these universities is contingent upon state support, and they are operated according to strict state regulations.

One factor that has been shown to influence motivation to succeed academically is the size of the student body at public institutions. Size (e.g., the total number of students enrolled) contributes to many of the problematic issues that develop at public universities. For example, mistakes on transcripts or on a tuition invoice (as well as the speed with which these types of logistical and documentation errors are corrected), can be exacerbated at larger institutions.

Classes at public institutions fill quickly, so student veterans might not be able to get the exact schedule they need or want. Most public universities provide a limited number of sections for each course, and class sizes may be very large, which means that the environment may not be as personalized or as nurturing as it might be at private or smaller colleges. Access to faculty members also may be limited, because each faculty member at larger institutions may be responsible for instructing hundreds of students, resulting in less, or at least limited, time available to devote to each student. Additionally, some faculty members may be more focused on conducting research and publishing than teaching, further limiting their availability. Finally, if student veterans are introverted or not inclined to join student organizations, attending a larger school places them at an even higher risk of feeling lonely or isolated. These social, personal, logistical, and emotional factors are more likely to continue for a prolonged period of time at larger institutions, where classes are large, students' number in the tens of thousands, and students often remain anonymous. Across time, these factors may naturally have a detrimental effect on GPA.

In addition, the availability of student services and other similar resources at these institutions, as opposed to private institutions, has been problematic. Many state institutions have heralded themselves and been recognized as "veteran friendly" campuses; however, this moniker does not guarantee that

student veterans will persist and succeed academically. Claims that institutions are “veteran friendly” and that they have larger and healthier student veterans associations have attracted student veterans, but these same institutions may have failed to retain them as a result of inadequate support. It is not uncommon that some institutions market themselves as “veteran friendly” in order to attract veterans (or, more specifically, the state and federal funding that is attached to them). However, upon examination, these institutions lack the resources and support systems that student veterans need to be academically successful. This misleading, so-called “military friendly” pitch made by some institutions to entice veterans could be another reason why student veterans tend to underperform at public institutions. As a result, these student veterans struggle and earn significantly lower GPAs.

Research Question 3: What academic involvements, if any, impact the academic success of first-year veterans? Academic involvements were grouped into Block 2, which included variables that student veterans were exposed to during their first year enrolled at an institution of higher education. The variables in this block included frequency of questions asked in class, frequency of class presentations, reviewed drafts of a project/paper, diverse perspectives in class discussions, prepared/studied for a class, taken a foreign language course, studied abroad, taken an independent study course, prepared/studied for class, attended an orientation, full-time or part-time student, number of credit hours, graduated from high school, and high school GPA.

Number of Credit Hours

The number of credit hours taken emerged as a significant negative predictor of GPA. This finding indicates that veterans who enroll in a higher number of credit hours per term are likely to earn lower GPAs. Researchers have suggested that beginning college enrolled in fewer courses is consistent with the principles underlying a developmental approach to academic success, an approach that is appropriate for many student veterans attending college for the first time (Gordon, 1989). The number of credit hours in which student veterans choose to enroll could be attributed to underestimating the rigors of higher education (e. g., enrolling in a greater number of courses without accurate reflection about the amount of work required) and financial ambivalence (e. g., the attitude that since tuition is paid for by the government, there is no need for accountability).

In addition, the number of credit hours in which student veterans are enrolled could influence GPA, because the number of credit hours represents students’ commitment to academics relative to other time-consuming activities, such as work or family. Student veterans tend to enroll in fewer and less difficult courses because of their many responsibilities—for example, managing households (including children and older relatives), working full time, and other consuming roles. The amount of time student veterans have to devote to attending class and completing assignments is limited, so student veterans select courses carefully to ensure they succeed academically. Student veterans take lighter credit loads in order to have time for their many other commitments outside of school.

Student veterans tend to struggle academically for a variety of reasons. Some veterans have been out of school for too long and fail to accurately anticipate academic difficulties; others may have cognitive, social, or emotional disabilities that inhibit learning; and others may come to college ill-prepared. According to Zusman (2005), academic standards are likely to be increased during the next few years; therefore, students embarking on their college experience, especially student veterans, would be wise to understand more completely the academic expectations required of them (the ability to think for themselves, create meaning out of what they learn, organize information, integrate individual skills into whole sets of processes, and apply new learning to new or novel situations). Likewise, they also would be prudent to gain a better understanding of the amount of time and energy required to meet these requirements.

Research Question 4: What faculty-to-student interactions, if any, impact the academic success of first-year veterans? The variables in this environmental block included whether student veterans used email to communicate with an instructor, talked about career aspirations with a professor, discussed ideas from class readings with a faculty member, worked on a research project with a faculty member outside of class, developed relationships with faculty members, received oral feedback from a faculty member,

worked with a faculty member on activities other than coursework, and developed relationships with staff members. Two environmental variables (i.e., talked to a faculty member about career aspirations, and received oral feedback from a faculty member about academic performance), were statistically significant predictors of first-term GPA.

Oral Feedback from Faculty Members

The variable received oral feedback from faculty members about academic performance was found to be a significant positive predictor of veterans' academic success. This finding indicates that student veterans tend to have higher GPAs when they receive oral feedback from a faculty member regarding their performance on class projects, papers, and exams than when they do not receive such feedback. One characteristic of effective oral feedback is personalized comments that assist students in understanding their academic performance level (Hattie, 2008). Hattie's research (2008) revealed that feedback is among the most powerful influences on achievement. When faculty members provide specific, constructive feedback to individual students, it yields a deeper understanding. Schlossberg (1989) stated that the "supports" category includes emotional support sources and networks. The availability and willingness of faculty members who give feedback and positive reinforcement could confidently help student veterans cope with their academic transitions.

Student engagement is no less important for the success of student veterans than for traditional students attending college. In fact, student-faculty interaction is a key factor for student persistence and success (Kuh, 2001). Face-to-face interaction leads students to view their instructors as "role models, mentors, and guides for continuous, lifelong learning" (NSSE, 2010a, p. 37). Research has indicated clearly that student-faculty interaction plays an integral role in achievement of successful outcomes for student veterans.

Talking to Faculty Members about Career Aspirations

Talking to faculty members about their career aspirations was a statistically significant negative predictor of veterans' academic success. This indicates that student veterans who speak frequently with faculty members about their career aspirations tend to have lower GPAs. One explanation for these results is that student veterans often are in a phase characterized by exploration about their major and their career. Indecisiveness regarding their career aspirations can be overwhelming. Uncertainty about their career goals and the reality of not living up to their aspirations can impact both the morale and the grades of student veterans. In short, talking with faculty members about their career path, about their major, and about their indecision can be related to a number of internal and external barriers and conflicts that student veterans encounter.

Research Question 5: What student-to-student interactions, if any, impact the academic success of first-year veterans? The variables in this block included how often student veterans worked with peers outside of class on an assignment; discussed ideas from readings or classes with others outside of class (e.g., other students, peers, family members, etc.); engaged in a conversation with a student who is different from them in terms of their race, ethnicity, religious beliefs, political opinions, or personal values; and how supportive their relationships are with other students. None of these variables proved to be significant predictors of GPA.

Research Question 6: What co-curricular involvements, if any, impact the academic success of first-year veterans? The regression results indicated that three co-curricular variables were statistically significant predictors of GPA; however, out of these three variables, two were negative predictors. The variables in Block 6 included how often student veterans attend a performance event, exercise, participate in spirituality initiatives, examine strengths and weaknesses of their own views on a topic, learn something new that changed the way they understand an issue or concept, participate in community service, participate in a living and learning community, create quality relationships with community members and peers, prepare/study for class and/or an academic involvement, how often they work full-time or part-time, participate in extracurricular activities, participate in relaxing or socializing, spend time with family/provide care for family, and commute to class.

From this block, one variable emerged as a statistically significant predictor of GPA: the amount of time spent attending an art exhibit, play, dance, musical, theater, athletic event, or other performance activity variable appeared as a negative predictor of veterans' academic success. This finding indicates that student veterans who participate in involvement activities are more likely to have lower GPAs, which contradicts traditional involvement theory. However, it is important to note that the design of this particular question regarding student veterans' participation in involvement activities raised serious concerns about its validity. The results of this particular question cannot be considered a valid description of the student veterans' involvement.

When student veterans first enter college, they must transition to the overwhelming, independent, and fast-paced lifestyle of a college student. Clark identified (2005) obstacles that freshman college students have to overcome, range from forming new social networks, changing study habits, and learning to be self-sufficient. These components could affect a student veteran's ability in becoming acclimated to the college community and achieving academic success. To feel anchored on campus, students may become more involved by attending a performance, joining a club, participating in student government, or joining a sports team. These social opportunities facilitate relationships with other peers from different class years and, as a result, possibly reduce stress related to the rigors of college academics. However, athletic events, student organizations, and other campus activities sometimes compete for time that student veterans should spend studying, which can result in lower grades. Although Astin (1994) has suggested that involvement and engagement increase persistence, other research found that "over involvement" can be associated with lowered academic performance.

Some researchers have argued that the type of organization (e.g., student organizations, Greek letter organizations, and intramurals) influences the academic success of students (Baker, 2008). Baker (2008) conducted a study to examine the impact of various types of organizations on the academic performance of underrepresented students and found that the type of organization makes a difference. For example, scholarship requirements that some organizations place on their members, particularly for Greek letter organizations, might impact a student's motivation to do well academically. Many sororities and fraternities require a minimum GPA to simply gain membership into the organization. Baker's findings suggest that while student veterans can benefit from involvement, the nature of the organization and the nature of the event must be taken into consideration. For example, student veterans may be less likely to attend a performance activity considering their work engagements and family obligations. These results support Hartnett's (1965) conclusion that too much involvement in extracurricular activities outside of the classroom can lead to lower academic performance, but challenges Astin's (1984) belief that more involvement is better.

Exercising

The second co-curricular variable from Block 6, exercising or participating in physical activity, also emerged as a positive predictor of veterans' academic success. More than 72% of student veterans in this study indicated that they participated in exercise or physical activities "very often." Exercise promotes a positive sense of self and accomplishment. This positive sense of self, derived through exercise may help student veterans meet small, successive goals and to transition successfully through their first year in college. According to Sargent and Schlossberg (1988), reconstruction of a valued self-identity is essential to transition, and frequent physical exercise may facilitate this reconstruction. Transitions occur over time and entail change and adaptation. For example, developmental, personal, relational, situational, societal, or environmental changes often require individuals to alter their perspective, change their behavior, or modify their thoughts. Schlossberg (1989) stated that an individual must employ a number of methods of coping with the transition, which constitutes the "strategies" component. Student veterans who frequently exercise and participate in physical activity, as a coping mechanism, could experience calmer transitions, which could potentially result in modest improvements in the classroom.

Time Spent Commuting to Class

The variable time spent commuting to class also emerged as a significant negative predictor of veterans' academic success. This finding suggests that the more time student veterans spend commuting to class, the lower their GPA is likely to be. Student veterans in this study reported that they live off campus (74%) and commute to campus; therefore, the most obvious concerns that commuter students share are those related to transportation: parking, traffic, fixed transportation schedules, inclement weather, vehicle maintenance, transportation costs, and locating alternative means of transportation when their primary means fails.

In addition to the increased complexity associated with commuting, Astin (2001) reported that commuting has been negatively correlated with attainment of a bachelor's degree. Commuting also has been associated with negative effects on self-assessment of emotional health. In short, "substantial commuting seems to increase the level of stress experienced by undergraduate students" (p. 390)

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The results of this study led to two primary recommendations for practice regarding student veteran involvement and student veteran transitions.

The first recommendation for practice is to make data-driven decisions when determining the best options for assisting student veterans. By using data on student veterans' involvement more effectively, faculty members and staff members can create opportunities to enhance student veterans' involvement in ways that meet their needs. Rather than expecting student veterans to adjust their lifestyles and schedules, it is the responsibility of colleges and universities to design curricular and co-curricular mechanisms specifically and intentionally to involve non-traditional students in learning. In addition, faculty members and staff members should proactively support student veterans during their first year by developing a plan to guide them through academic and personal challenges, and to encourage student veterans to take ownership and accountability for their own success.

A second recommendation for practice is to develop transition programming for student veterans regarding their career path. The transition to college is not a quick, simple process for student veterans. Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson (1997) explained that students need to become familiar with norms and expectations, relinquish past roles, understand the transition, and move into a new life phase. For example, a one-day or one-week veteran-specific orientation to campus resources and activities could help student veterans translate military skills (e.g., adaptability and mission focus) to civilian life.

Being a student is only one of several important and time-consuming roles veterans juggle. Most student veterans work either full-time or part-time to pay fees to attend institutions of higher education. Student veterans' time is a limited resource that directly impacts their ability to engage in co-curricular activities that are essential. To assist in their transition, institutions could sponsor a Student Veterans Expo/Fair to provide resources related to career counseling, advising, health care, study skills, note taking, test preparation, and time management. Administrators need to implement services strategically and intentionally that are tailored to the needs of student veterans, based on the understanding that student veterans select their campus involvement activities carefully.

CONCLUSIONS

This study was the result of an effort to identify factors that predict the academic success of veterans in their first year of college. The findings confirm that there are ways for colleges and universities to work with these students and help them to achieve academic success.

Student veterans' who transition from the role of soldier to the role of student have continued to face significant obstacles. Policies, programs, practices, and services that remove these difficulties increase the chances of student success. Student veterans comprise a unique student population. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to meeting their educational and transitional needs, however by providing student veterans with educational tools and transitional experience through higher education, their lives could be

improved. Appreciation for student veteran transitions through education can be demonstrated in the process. As colleges and universities face the challenges of recruiting and retaining students as well as the pressures of increased accountability and success, there needs to be a system in place to identify students who possess the skills and abilities to earn degrees.

The results of this study suggested that student veterans do not desire special treatment but rather a sense that faculty members appreciate their circumstances, including family obligations, work obligations, and academic challenges. Their health, both physical and mental, will continue to be an important concern, and this may become a concern if colleges and universities are unprepared to provide the services needed to implement these accommodations. Significant increases in the number of veterans attending institutions of higher education suggest that everyone in higher education needs to learn more about this population.

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