CHAPTER 11

Not a Hero and Not a Stranger: Serving Veterans in Higher Education

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Military veterans face many of the same barriers and traumas as other populations and non-traditional students, while simultaneously encountering problematic—and even contradictory—societal expectations and stigma around perceptions of heroism and trauma. This chapter explores the internalized and externalized pressures which student veterans may face and discusses perspectives which educators and administrators can integrate into their practices, policies, and programming to build a learning environment that is responsive to the strengths and interests of their student veterans.

Key to this approach is the critical analysis of existing narratives about military service and a recognition that institutions of higher education play an important role in a veteran's transition from the military to civilian communities in ways which can supplement their sense of belonging and being or cause friction or tension in an environment they have no choice but to endure.

I offer the considerations in this chapter as just one veteran, shaped by my own experiences as a student veteran and as someone who has led and collaborated on a multitude of veteran and student-veteran reintegration programming. I recognize that my experiences and perspectives may not be universal; it is my hope that they are informative and enlightening for those who wish to do more for other student veterans as they navigate their own journey of reintegration.

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What Makes a Veteran?

While there are certain parallels between experiences of community integration by veterans of recent conflicts and those of prior service periods, the population explored in this chapter are those who have served during the time of America's longest wars: the Post-9/11, or Global War On Terror veterans following the declarations of open war by the United States after September 11, 2001. More specifically, the use of the term *veteran* is reflective of individuals defined by Title 38 of the US Code of Federal Regulations (1996) as "a person who served in the active military, naval, or air service and who was discharged or released under conditions other than dishonorable," including a "reservist or member of the National Guard called to Federal active duty or disabled from a disease or injury incurred or aggravated in line of duty or while in training status." Some veterans might more readily discuss or feel connected to their veteran identity than others, just as their military experience can vary dramatically from person to person. Not every veteran has served overseas or has seen combat, and not every veteran had much of a choice of where they served or what jobs and tasks they performed, so it is important not to treat the veteran identity as a fixed experience let alone a uniform label worn by all or an experience that should be measured against that of other veterans.

Veterans: A Community of Identity in Transition

Like others, the veteran community originates from some sort of a shared experience, beginning with one unifying experience of having served in the Armed Forces, and varying considerably thereafter by such things as duty assignments and military occupations, gender, race, ethnicity, country or community of origin, sexual orientation, dates of service, and combat experience. The common connection is having served in an environment where members formed and adhered to a unique lifestyle and value set. As veteran is an identifier for those who no longer serve on active duty, this also means this community shares one other common experience: that of transition and reintegration to a civilian society upon completion of their duty. This transition experience can shape both the externalized and internalized identity and the well-being of the veteran.

Community itself is not limited to geography, though identity and geography may be intertwined. Whether a community of place or a community of identity, both forms of community have at their foundation a sense of established being or belonging (a shared history), as well as a sense for prospective being or belonging (a shared future), influenced by a person's ideal or self-orienting purpose. It defines, is defined, builds, unifies, and separates. Community is the portrait of our manifest or desired existence, our latent or acknowledged connections, and our inter-reliance with one another. Throughout our lives, we find ourselves members of—or desiring access to—multiple communities; for instance, we may recognize geographic boundaries

as a placeholder that represents an association, we give value to while concomitantly appreciating an experience or history-based connection that extends beyond place. These parallel (though not always intersecting) community memberships can supplement each other, or seed friction within us. This role of community as a source of friction or supplement to a sense of belonging is key to understanding how we can better foster a veteran's reintegration.

When woven together in a coherent or desired way, community interactions can strengthen our self-image and empower our interactive capacity or capability. When frayed or disconnected, community interactions can cause dissonance or detriment within us and unto others. While someone could—and many do—survive on that which is traumatic or deleterious, we depend upon that which is confluent or in harmony with our ideals to thrive. A thriving student veteran is undoubtedly a stated goal by many institutions of higher education, and it is essential that colleges and universities become better prepared to recognize the barriers to veteran reintegration and determine whether and where they are supplementing belonging or fostering friction. Adaptation is an unavoidable requirement for veterans, but it should be a burden they do not have to shoulder alone. Often, it is more than the veteran who suffers from the frictions of reintegration: it is also their families and the communities they belong to (or strive to belong to) that experience unrealized potential. It is only through a purposeful and shared effort that veterans with and within their civilian communities, including academic institutions, can achieve the capacity to thrive.

According to the US Census Bureau's 2020 report titled "Those Who Served: America's Veterans From World War II to the War on Terror," the number of U.S. adults who were veterans declined from 18% in 1980 to 7% in 2018. This new generation of veterans—comprising more than 3.7 million people—are demographically different than veterans from prior service eras, and the future composition of our Armed Forces is expected to follow this trend:

- Currently, about 1 in 8 men in the United States are veterans, possibly falling to about 1 in 14 by 2040; comparatively, 9% of veterans—or 1.7 million—are women, possibly rising to 17% by 2040.
- Among veterans of all eras, Post-9/11 veterans represent the highest proportion with a disability, have more education, and are more diverse, with 34.9% reporting some other race and ethnicity than non-Hispanic White.

There is a broader benefit to an institution's full participation in this reintegration effort, as shown in the Veterans Civic Health Index, published by the National Conference on Citizenship (2017), which reports that veterans are more likely to volunteer, vote, donate, and belong to civic organizations than their non-veteran peers. If a student veteran desires to serve and give

back beyond their time in uniform, then the very institutions that are shaping their future should focus on building a sense of belonging, while reducing any friction within the academic environment itself both physical and social. The veteran subculture might be defined by a unique set of experiences, language, cues, values, and norms, but it is also apparent that it is one defined largely by an orientation—not necessarily an obligation—toward service.

Modern Presence of Veterans in Higher Ed

According to the Veterans in Higher Education Factsheet by the Postsecondary National Policy Institute (2020), student veterans are older (24–40) and reported higher GPA and completion rates than their non-veteran peers, and they are also more likely to be first-generation college students; however, they also report challenges in adapting to higher education and are also less likely to participate in campus activities. Though student veterans face many of the same barriers and traumas as other students, sometimes these may be exacerbated by the built environment and institutional culture, even unintentionally. All students experience internalized and externalized pressures to conform, challenge, or create within these spaces, and for students who relocate to attend a university, they do so having lost a measure of the social capital they had accrued or inherited in their previous communities. In this light, veterans experience a loss or thinning out of those capitals, as the experience of the veteran community is that of a diaspora. Where can a student veteran go to leverage the relationships, connections, and resources once all around them, other than to start again? Such a re-building of social and other capitals—or at least a bridging—necessitates an interactional relationship with the institutions that are at the forefront of the veteran's reintegration. All too often, however, they are met with transactional solutions, often in the form of benefit counseling. We must recognize that veterans need more than a connection to resources: they and we as educators need a connection to one another and to recognize that reintegration is a shared journey.

The Author's Perspective

My life is inexorably tied to this era of wars and the role of higher education in reintegration. At the age of 18, and not long after the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, I called the US Army recruiter and began a nearly year-long journey to become a soldier. I enrolled in 6-months of GED courses, participated in pre-enlistment training, evaluations, and activities, and ended up serving for 6 ½ years across two-enlistments. I would go on to serve over 3 years overseas, to include a year in South Korea and nearly 2½ years deployed to Iraq. I had a successful military career and achieved much more than I thought possible when I swore my first oath. I won't recount those experiences in this chapter, other than to say that when I wasn't deployed or in training, I frequently experienced jarring interactions with civilians who regarded me

as some sort of hero who needed a hug, a free beer, cash in my hand, and thankful handshakes or backslaps. Even though I was honorably discharged in 2009, I still haven't figured out a response to those interactions—which often felt transactional—that I am completely comfortable with, given that there are those with whom I served who came back injured or who were killed in action, and my own choice for service in the military was not for the glory or greatness but for that essential Army value of selfless service. If I was a hero—which I most certainly was not—what does that make those who paid a higher sacrifice or put more on the line for the sake of others?

In a way, this question guided what would become nearly a decade of direct or supportive work for veterans. I enrolled in college classes just two-weeks after my discharge and witnessed what it was like to be a student veteran at two different universities in a time when veteran benefits were changing, when universities were trying to figure out how to serve a growing number of student veterans, and when the Department of Veterans Affairs was under scrutiny for delaying or denying benefits to student veterans in the years during and following the Great Recession. After earning both my undergraduate and graduate degrees in social work, I found myself serving as the first veterans coordinator for a small private college, and then later as the veterans coordinator for a larger public university.

At both institutions and in collaboration with others, my first and ongoing goal was to convince the administration that we needed to do more than process benefits or refer student veterans to healthcare services, and that we should meet them with more than symbols and events of patriotism, gratitude, cliché displays of militarism, or treating every veteran event as a Memorial Day service.

Between the Pit and the Pedestal: Challenges to Community Integration

As we acknowledge the diverse experiences and representation of student veterans, as well as their need to reintegrate into a civilian community, what good were we doing by constantly anchoring their experiences and environment to a stereotyped past or an endless "Welcome Home Parade"? How might a student veteran feel about constant reminders of those killed in action or being treated as fragile shadows of their former selves because of perceived wound they endured?

As illustrated in Fig. 11.1, such pathologizing and acculturalization of personhood and traits marginalize the student veteran with separate, unattainable, or objectifying expectations: a veteran must be a hero of achievement to be put on a pedestal or a warrior broken by unspoken horrors to be pitied. To relate and build community with student veterans, we must re-align our language, practices, and beliefs, to see ourselves as peers in a community that is yet to be fully actualized.

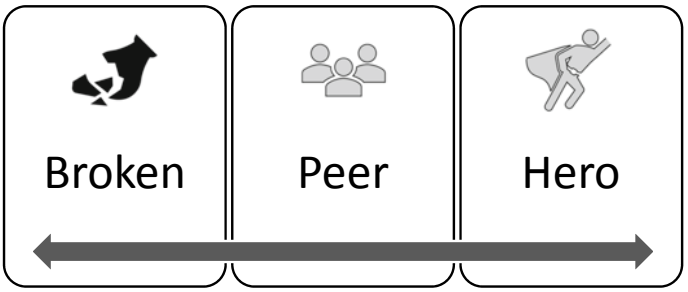

Fig. 11.1 Between the pit and the pendulum

Principles for Change

The mechanism for change lies in an interactional approach with the student veterans in collaboratively witnessing and creating a shared identity and emphasizing a sense of being and belonging on and off campus. In what follows, I outline three main principles to help educators and policy-makers create college learning environments that support a sense of belonging for student veterans.

Fostering an Environment of Mutuality and Belonging

- *Challenge*: overcoming identity conflict and marginalization from unfair and unrealistic portrayals (such as a broken hero), and past-oriented stereotypes.
- *Approach*: develop a community which fosters veteran-civilian identity amalgamation, focusing more on similarities in present and future-oriented interests through the physical and social environments.
  - Physical environment—design spaces which do not segregate veterans or overemphasize symbology of militarism and armed conflict; keep memorial events separate from veteran-oriented events.
  - Social environment—focus on interactional engagement, events, and programming which emphasize belonging and an openness, striving for exchanges informed by cultural humility.

Supporting Student Veterans in the Co-discovery of Their Future Selves

- *Challenge*: student veterans are often anchored in the past because of the social or physical environment on campus and maybe encouraged or feel obliged to stick to academic programs or social events that are

aligned with their military experience; student veterans may find themselves unsatisfied with their field of study, or disinterested in the social activities, and thus alienated from the campus environment.
  - *Approach*: encourage and support student veterans in exploring broader educational and career options as well as social and cultural experiences, enabling a more holistic civilian-veteran identity transition that might not even be related to their military occupations, experiences, and expertise.

Bridging Communities Beyond the Campus

- *Challenge*: student veterans experience a loss or thinning out of military-community capitals as they reintegrate into civilian life; approaches to ameliorate this are largely transactional, consumer-oriented, or focus on referring student veterans to health or educational benefits, rather than meaningful interactional opportunities to build new capitals.
- *Approach*: develop a purposeful exchange with student veterans that stresses community self-examination, exploration of social networks, social structure, modes and elements of community membership, and opportunities for community engagement. Think beyond veteran-only organizations, such as pathways to civic and board service, wellness and recreation, housing, and family-oriented opportunities.

Consider utilizing approaches that serve as a means toward attaining social and environmental integrations as both an outcome and as part of the process itself. Simply put, the process should be earnest and rewarding for everyone involved. We want veterans to know that they mean more to an institution than the GI BILL and mean more to a classroom than stories from their service. Ultimately, an established sense of belonging on campus is just as beneficial to the academic community as it can be for the student veteran. Furthermore, bridging those linkages beyond the campus will help realize long-term benefits for the broader community, stability, and opportunity for the veteran, and relationships with the university never before explored.

Conclusion

Applying some or all of these perspectives will look different from institution to institution and community to community. My hope is that academia serves as a space of bridging opportunity for veterans and a facilitator for integration of veterans and non-veterans alike. The end goal is two-fold: a rewarding academic experience and a successful bridge to a thriving future. One does not need to be a veteran to have a meaningful impact on a student veteran's reintegration, nor is it necessary to understand the lingo or to have shared histories. Simply put, with so few Americans serving in the Armed Forces, it is unrealistic to assume that reintegration can be done by veterans alone or to

move forward while always looking in the rearview mirror. If we are to establish and build community on campus and beyond its boundaries, then civilians and veterans must co-create that shared future together, and there is no better place to start than academia.

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