

Serving Those Who Have Served: Preparing for Student Veterans in our Writing Programs, Classes and Writing Centers

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Thank you for inviting me to speak today about serving those student veterans who are now entering our institutions by the hundreds of thousands. Current figures estimate that there are over 2.5 million Gulf-War era II veterans now separated from service with more coming as troops withdraw from Afghanistan (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Table A-5). Over a half million veterans and their families are taking advantage of the new Post 9/11 college plan (Shinseki). And because these benefits stay in effect for fifteen years, veterans who currently have jobs are also returning to college to further their education. Right now, veterans represent about four percent of all undergrads (Bonar and Domenic). We in community colleges especially have been aware of their presence, and expect a 10% increase next year (“For War Veterans”). Part of the reason for the increase is the alarming unemployment rate among recent veterans in this recession, 12% overall in 2011; as high as 29.1% among males ages 18–24 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Table A-5). But we aren’t alone. The new GI bill also pays the entire tuition to four-year public institutions. Its special Yellow Ribbon Program opens the doors to private schools as well, which means that this increase affects us all.

As writing teachers, we often serve on the front lines as students’ first point of contact and often most personal college experience. Thus, we have a direct responsibility to be prepared ourselves in order to help veterans stay in college and be successful. We should take them into account when we decide what kinds of reading and writing we assign, and what conferencing and writing center support we provide. So, this afternoon, I want to give an overview of issues some student veterans face when they come to college. I will share with you important research and resources in our field and then describe some programmatic initiatives that you may consider developing.

Why all this effort? What do our returning soldiers want? They certainly don't need us to "fix them." They don't want our sympathy, either, but they do appreciate our support. Scott Ury from the University of Missouri, St. Louis declares: "I don't need special preference. . . . But in the same breath, I am appreciative of teachers who say, 'yeah, this is a veteran and they are not a traditional student and they require special attention'" ("Veterans Returning to College"). What we can do, then, is to be alert for at-risk veterans, and provide appropriate, respectful, empowering environments to ease their transition.

I must stress at the outset that all veterans are not the same. Not all need or want special attention. Despite the "damaged soldier" or "Rambo" types spotlighted in the media, the vast majority are indistinguishable from other college students. Veterans may be the ones who sit right up front in our classrooms, openly identifying themselves, like a student I'll call Joe, who proudly stated he was a vet the first day of class. More often, they decide to park themselves anonymously in the back row. Or they may remain invisible, literally, in our online classes. Student veterans do not have to disclose their status or disabilities, so we have no real way of knowing who they are. And, even if they do reveal their service, we can't make assumptions about their present condition or combat experiences. Some may have never been in combat. Some may still be traumatized by their experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. But not all. Others may have to deal with the added peril of being recalled for a second or third tour of duty. Many are trying to manage the tensions of changing family relationships, shifting experiences of authority in civilian life, or general feelings of alienation and depression. Our classes include their sons and daughters, even parents, who may be sensitive to the ways soldiers are depicted in course literature or discussions. And we shouldn't overlook recent refugees, those survivors of other wars, as in Sudan and Burma, who may be dealing with similar traumas. With these diverse populations, we have every reason to be mindful about what and how we teach.

Let me start with a general profile of veterans we will see in the coming years. The 2010 National Survey of Student Engagement, which included over 500 colleges and 11,000 veterans, found that most student vets are:

- Male, older, part-time, 1st-generation, and distance learners, who are "less engaged with faculty" than non-veterans (Moltz)
- 1 in 5 cited at least 1 disability compared to 1 in 10 non-veterans (Vance and Miller 21).

The ACE Report of 2011 described the following common physical disabilities of veterans of current wars:

- loss of limbs
- severe burns
- deafness
- vision difficulties, and
- traumatic brain injury, usually from a blow to the head. Some TBIs are treated within six months, but others, more severe, last much longer (Accommodating Student Veterans 5)

We also know that psychological or emotional issues appeared in a third of males, and over 10 percent in females (Vance and Miller 21), and that these symptoms, which can surface years after discharge, can be exacerbated by the pressures of academic life. Potential difficulties include:

- survivor's guilt
- health issues
- sleep deprivation with nightmares
- alcohol and drug abuse
- anxiety over redeployment or separation from unit colleagues
- death of a colleague, and
- issues of reintegration into family (Accommodating Student Veterans 4).

Almost half of veterans reported contemplating suicide with 7.7 percent making an attempt (National Center for Veterans Studies in "Operation Promise").

Cognitive problems, including learning disabilities, are the most widespread disability (40 percent) and can affect:

- "attention and concentration,
- information processing,
- learning and memory deficits,
- sluggish abstract reasoning,
- slowed executive functions (problem solving, planning, sequencing), and
- time management difficulties" (Accommodating Student Veterans 3).

Finally, it was reported that, in general, veterans have weaker skill levels: 20% had "C+" averages or lower (Berrett). Writing, of course, demands that all these cognitive areas are functioning properly. Remember Joe? He

probably had a learning disability before the service, but after a poor essay grade, I asked him to check with our Special Needs Office. He had never heard of it, but he returned with the realization that he needed and was entitled to accommodations. A few weeks later, though, he came late for a test, with a full cast on his arm, the result of a bar fight. Now he couldn't write or type, and his mind was fuzzy from medications. "I had to protect my wife," he explained, "and now she's mad at me. I've got my homework from last week, but could I take the test tomorrow?" Of the three veterans in class, Joe was the only one who required flexibility, but he did pull it together and passed.

While I just gave a long list of possible challenges veterans could face, the realm of disabilities, we know, is not specific to veterans. Not all are a liability. In fact, they often possess positive traits we welcome in any class. According to the American Council on Education, they demonstrate "a degree of maturity, experience with leadership, familiarity with diversity, and a mission-focused orientation that exceed those of nearly all their peers" (Accommodating Student Veterans 1). In fact, when my one class was analyzing intercultural communication barriers, Joe gave specific examples from his army training and experiences in Afghanistan. Knowing this fuller picture of student veterans, we don't have to be overly anxious. However, adjustments to our programs and courses may improve their chances of retention and success.

At the macro-level, all of us can help establish veterans' learning communities, student VA chapters, counseling and tutoring which offer resources and support. Take note, however. Vet centers alone are not a panacea. Not all veterans go through the VA, and not all female veterans feel safe in the male-dominant setting. In what other ways can faculty help? As role models, we should challenge any inaccurate stereotypes of soldiers, veterans or student veterans, found anywhere in our readings, in class discussions, or in the hallways.

As writing program administrators, you can make a special impact. After all, you work with writing and literature faculty, writing center staff, WID and WAC instructors, Directors of Special Needs Services, and hopefully Veterans Administrators. You can share information with all these groups about veterans' general expectations, skills and challenges, potential stressors, and how injuries can affect cognitive processes needed for oral, written and interpersonal work in writing classes. You are in a unique position to recommend effective pedagogical approaches, writing assignments, and learning environments. At the very least, you can educate others to avoid these three blunders: profiling all veterans as unstable, outing them in class (even with good intentions, even after they have told you of their

status), or politicizing them or the war in discussions. So that we don't do more harm than good . . . as in the following case.

It was the fall of 2010 at the Community College of Baltimore County. In his composition class Charles Whittington wrote the following about his experience in Iraq: "Killing is a drug to me. . . . At first, it was weird and felt wrong, but by the time of the third and fourth killing it feels so natural. . . . That's part of the reason why I want to go back . . . because of this addiction" ("Veteran's Essay"). Whittington's instructor gave him an A for the piece and told him to publish it, which he subsequently did in the college paper. But that very same essay caused his expulsion. He was not allowed to return to campus unless he submitted to a psychological evaluation. He never came back (Berrett). He did offer to show a prior positive evaluation from a counselor. Despite that and a clean college record, the administrators, concerned with campus safety, held their ground and gave him incompletes for the term. Yes, his narrative described some disturbing scenes; however, the college authorities had neglected to notice this other, more telling section of Whittington's essay: ". . . I still feel the addictions . . . but now I know how to keep myself composed . . ." ("Veteran's Essay"). Then when ABC News gave the case national coverage, online responses by veterans went viral. One warned: ". . . let a vet write a paper and he is trouble [sic] this is why some vets break. He made mistakes . . . but he is still human and was educating people on what war is like. Hats off to him and sorry for the ignorance around you"(online response by Sarge68 found in Carollo). Other veterans, rather than being empathetic, angrily questioned whether Whittington's story was true and if he had seen combat at all. An extreme case, surely, but it shows how unprepared his teacher and college were for this student and this kind of writing, and how misperceptions, inappropriate approaches, and unmeasured responses can lead to unforeseen consequences and a public backlash. We don't want this unfortunate experience to happen to us. So, do we shy away from assigning personal war narratives? Do we counsel students to keep these distressing essays private? Or, do we refer them to public programs that would give them a voice within a safer space?

There certainly is much good work being done across the nation in community-based writing centers. Maxine Hong Kingston was one of the first to start a writing community of Vietnam veterans in San Francisco in 1994 to help them in "processing the chaos" (1). Residential centers, like Veteran's Sanctuary in New York, sponsor workshops for writing, as well as music, and the arts. The NEA-sponsored Operation Homecoming archives recent soldiers' letters ("For War Veterans"). And the Warrior Writers Project in the New York City area gives veterans "space for community build-

ing, healing and redefinition.” (Incidentally, the term “warrior writers” was coined in 2008 by some Iraq Vets Against the War in their book *Warrior Writers: Remaking Sense*). The problem is that workshops may not be available in every town, and not every student may want to join such communities. Soldiers’ writings, though, can be useful as online sources for class readings. The Warrior Writers website, for example, has been used by Karen Springstein at SUNY Pottsdam. In one project, she transforms material from veterans’ own uniforms into paper, which is made into books for their own poetry and prose. As program directors, you might think about which extracurricular or programmatic venues you could establish. Here are some questions and models to consider.

DECISION 1: CAN WE OFFER EXTRACURRICULAR CAMPUS WRITING EXPERIENCES FOR STUDENT VETS?

Some universities have developed writing groups for veterans, weekly writing seminars, and writing conferences within their institutions but outside the classroom. Regrettably, Alexis Hart and Roger Thompson in their 2011 CCCC study of institutional support in writing classrooms found that only about 3% of the 439 CCCC members surveyed were aware of any such groups on campus. In contrast to previous wars, soldiers deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan have been used to writing essays, poems, and stories in journals, e-mails, and on Facebook as forms of expression or entertainment. One way to continue avenues for self-expression would be in dedicated forums. Western Connecticut State University devoted a special issue of its literary journal to writing by veterans. One Army reservist, Gregg Taylor, who suffered from PTSD, informs us of the value of his writing: “the hardest thing about going to war is coming home. . . . I had anxiety issues, a lot of pent-up aggression from my experience in Afghanistan that I learned to apply to my writing” (“For War Veterans”). If writing groups are already established on your campus, though, you might want to focus attention on dedicated writing classes instead.

DECISION 2: CAN WE, SHOULD WE, OFFER DEDICATED WRITING CLASSES FOR VETERANS?

One way to ease the transition from combat to the classroom is to create a cohort group of veterans who take their first term classes altogether. Cleveland State University’s SERV program did just that, with the University of Arizona, Eastern Kentucky University, Youngstown State University and others following. In particular, veterans-only writing classes have been developed by many institutions, perhaps your own. Sierra College allows

veterans to write about their military experiences in a Boots to Books class. Austin Community College, Northridge created a vets-only Comp I and Writing Memoir course, wherein writing about war experiences is voluntary. One advantage of cohort classes is that they reduce anxiety in the class environment; classes are generally smaller, and they feel that their buddies can understand what they are writing about. Because they learn in the military to be on time and ready, they don't have to be irritated by traditional students' perceived apathy, unpreparedness, or texting (Hart and Thompson "Institutional"). Veterans know they have only thirty-six months of funding, so they don't have time to repeat courses with families depending upon them. Specialized classes also build camaraderie that eases their transition into academic life.

For those veterans who have weak academic skills or gaps in their education, and need developmental courses to catch up with general writing and research skills, cohort classes may be ideal. Their professors, some veterans themselves, have an awareness of special needs, for instance, anticipating absences for VA appointments and training. However, writing program administrators may determine that the money used to benefit a few might be used to impact more in tutoring services or faculty training. If classes aren't filled or funding is cut, as in the case of Cleveland State, the program may be dropped. Another disadvantage is that veterans may be further stigmatized as reclusive outsiders. Many veterans simply want to blend in and do the work. As a compromise, some colleges have created small cohorts within a regular section. In this way, younger students may have the opportunity to meet veterans, who bring leadership skills, maturity, a strong work ethic, and more depth in their writing that can be emulated. And a final plus is that interactions with other students can help break down stereotypes as they come to understand military experiences on a personal level.

DECISION 3: SHOULD WE ASSIGN READINGS, FILMS, AND ESSAYS ON WAR IN MIXED COMPOSITION CLASSES?

Should we require all students to write about war—not just in the abstract—but now as lived experience? As a profession, 4Cs adopted a resolution in 2003 that writing teachers should “engage students and others in learning and debate about issues and implication of the Iraqi war and any other acts of war” (Resolution 3). Our goal was, and is, to get college students to think critically about global conflicts and our roles in the world. Even without any veterans in class, we still have an ethical obligation to help students—as citizens—critically examine the issues as well as empathically understand the moral dilemmas soldiers and war survivors

have encountered. To that end, American University assigned David Finkel's acclaimed non-fiction work, *The Good Soldiers* (see Recommended Further Reading at end). Last winter, The Ohio State University offered a multimedia, multi-period global study of war for all students, with one section reserved for veterans only. Still, many veterans are uncomfortable with the topic. Are we prepared for the changing dynamics and potential debates in the classroom and for the kinds of support necessary for some "warrior writers"? What, how, and where to teach become complex issues.

Helen Benedict, author of *The Lonely Soldier*, believes that "The cultural gap between the military and civilians, filled as it is with suspicion and mistrust, must be bridged—for the sake of healing war-traumatized troops . . . and for the sake of our collective future." Reading about war, she continues, "can indeed open the eyes of civilians enough to make them feel sympathy and compassion—even about combat, even about sexual assault, even about war trauma" ("Final Thoughts"). In an article in *Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW)* magazine, Brett Holden explains that films are one of the avenues through which civilians understand combat life (15) and they do convey "the unexpected pain of being 'in-between' war and home" (18); however, much of what is seen is incorrect (Gibson 15). As a result, we have to be wary of novels and films that portray invincible heroes from past wars or only images of the "broken soldier" that feed on inaccurate myths.

As a precaution, we should make evident all texts and films in our syllabi, giving options for readings and writing. A veteran on my campus dropped her composition class when she discovered in the syllabus that her professor was going to show *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Obviously, this film isn't war-related; however, she knew that the screaming would be an emotional trigger. Happy to be forewarned, she easily added another class. During class discussions on war-related material, our role should be to present literary/historical background, keeping the focus on the characters in the text. If we go outside the text, we may want to compare characters and themes in the work to those in other, non-combat works to normalize it.

DECISION 4: SHOULD WE ASSIGN PERSONAL ESSAYS ON WAR EXPERIENCES?

The majority of respondents in the Hart/Thompson college study said they teach personal narrative, which can be problematic for veterans uncomfortable revealing their status and stories to other students. Compositionists acknowledge that the practice of writing about traumatic experiences as a therapeutic way to disclose or express emotions has support from many psychiatrists. James Pennebaker has documented how his subjects who wrote

about emotional topics for a few days “showed improvements in physical and mental health.” Furthermore, a study of 169 college essays found that writing about trauma as a dialogue with a known or imagined person promotes greater affective experiencing and cognitive processing than a direct narrative (Burke and Bradley 141). Shane Borrowman’s anthology *Trauma and the Teaching of Writing* is a valuable resource as well. Not all of us agree with this practice, however. Marcy Bauman says that she would “never ‘assign’ writing about war.” She argues from the perspective of power differentials, that professors’ higher status may inhibit how students will think and write about a topic; e.g., they may be afraid to agree with an unpopular war. And we can’t make the leap that any veteran even in a segregated class cares to write about military life.

Often psychological, social, and economic difficulties don’t fully manifest until a student is engrossed in or in conflict with an assignment. I know what you are thinking. I’ll just stay away from personal narratives and the war, and I’ll be OK. Well, Robert Hazard at the College of DuPage thought he’d be safe, too. His 30-year-old, two-tour veteran sailed through his literature class, but in the next term’s Comp class “just disappeared”—even though Hazard hadn’t required personal writing. Of course, we know that any writing can release repressed emotions and memories. English teachers, as I’ve often said, are not therapists. Some critics have even questioned our motives. Are we being voyeurs? And, how do we respond to writing about savage acts? Do we want another Whittington case? It would be helpful to talk about these subjects in workshops with faculty and tutors.

DECISION 5: HOW DO WE PREPARE FACULTY TO AVOID POTENTIALLY UNSETTLING DISCUSSIONS OF WAR?

Dan Fraizer in an issue of *Composition Forum* believes that controversial topics should not be shied away from but used as “critical inquiry” and “a form of social action for students in their communities.” We know that class discussions even without veterans present can be tense when students discuss the topic of war. Soldiers may be very guarded in discussions about Iraq and Afghanistan. While some may feel they were sold a bill of goods in the service and just want to move on, others may feel they are under attack. Some professors may speak against the war or make derogatory statements about the military, inadvertently causing veterans to feel more isolated. They may not speak up even though they feel students and professors lack accurate information. We surely don’t want to re-traumatize them, potentially resulting in misplaced anger, lack of concentration, absences, or withdrawal from the course. Then again, we don’t want to suppress discus-

sions, for veterans can shed light on topics based upon their knowledge. It's how we navigate these discussions that counts. One way is to separate government political decisions from the efforts of soldiers on the ground. When analyzing a war character, we ought to specify that this is an individual's decision. Not emblematic of all. We also don't want to pick out the veteran to speak for all veterans. Finally, we want to keep discussions balanced and check one-sided comments, reinforcing rules, especially for online commentary.

Avoiding the topic of war altogether does not free us of our responsibilities, for general discussions can become awkward in small groups with veterans. As older students, veterans do consider themselves more mature and experienced, although in college, they certainly are experiencing a loss of status. Military culture affects their perceptions. For instance, they don't like students who talk disrespectfully. They like order. They get frustrated when the professor isn't in control. They may openly challenge teachers in class, particularly, says Lisa Langstraat, if the instructor is a grad assistant and female. Do you see how this information and the chance to share experiences and resolutions would be useful in faculty workshops?

Another area to consider is the rhetoric veterans are comfortable using from military life and how that can be misinterpreted as disrespectful or contentious in class discussions. Galen Leonhardy warns that competitive "banter" expresses "serious issues while leavening emotional intensity. It can sometimes produce disquieting moments, however" (344). Veterans used to being direct can also shut down other students in peer review groups. Conversely, veterans can shut down when they hear the stupid personal questions students sometimes ask. You can find examples on You Tube. Here are some: "Have you ever killed anybody?" "I would have joined, but, you know, I got into college." "You're a vet? So, you're a lesbian?" ("Shit Civilians Say"). Students can be naïve. But soldiers tell me they are used to it. Operationally, as I have said, we should set ground rules for open discussions, encourage a wide range of views, and, I contend, not impose or share our own views of war.

DECISION 6: WHAT DO WE DO WITH ASSIGNMENTS AND COMMENTS?

Be specific and concrete in criteria for assignments. Even if materials and instructions are on Blackboard, students may not be able to find them. We know that those suffering from TBI-related issues may have difficulty following complex tasks. They need step-by-step instructions. At first, they need assignments and requirements explained explicitly. According to Cheryl Branker, they are comfortable with rule-based instruction, and good

at taking orders. She says their experience writing military reports, which are short, concrete, and formulaic, is very different from writing expository essays. Providing samples and models of academic essays will help, so they don't get angry and feel frustrated like a student at my college when his thesis statement was criticized. He said he should have been told the rules beforehand. When the teacher explained that writing is a process of feedback and revision, he said, "man, things don't work that way in the military" (Dryden). Veterans do, however, appreciate specific comments on papers—where errors are and how to improve. It may take time to wean them away, toward a process approach and accepting fewer directed comments. Individual conferences are key in making realistic progress and transitioning student veterans to academic rhetoric. And remember to give options on topics or readings, so veterans don't feel they have to write about war or combat.

What surprised me in my research is that many student veterans may be reluctant to seek help at the Writing Center, which is outside their "chain of command." They'd rather go to their professor. They also may feel that others need tutoring more, the same mindset of sacrificing in battle: when wounded, to check others first. Teachers have to find ways to get them there if they need it. Online courses can be a challenge. While sometimes an online course fits into a hectic schedule, taking all online classes for some veterans, especially some struggling with PTSD, is not healthy in the long term.

A final note about self-disclosure and response. When veterans do write about horrific events, we clearly can't just make editing marks and ignore the content. We can't just make innocuous remarks, like "thank you for sharing." Or even "thank you for your service," since some veterans find that to be a cliché and dismissive, an "empty salute." Discussions about the best ways to respond would be productive topics for faculty and writing center workshops.

In the end, how can we nurture veteran-friendly classes? To be prepared, we can take these steps. They are really no different from any good teaching practices:

1. Start with your course syllabus. There is a sample statement in the ACE report. Since veterans are used to clear expectations in the military, they prefer clear-cut syllabi. At the beginning at least, encourage a regular routine, keep up with the syllabus and assignments, don't change assignment or grading criteria, and give prompt feedback (Accommodating Student Veterans 7).

2. Use Universal Design with its individual, outcome-based, flexible approach. Use methods to help with concentration and memory, test taking, etc. (in Accommodating Student Veterans 8)
3. Learn ways to alleviate panic attacks and stress. Some veterans may exhibit a tendency toward hyper vigilance and increased sensitivity to small events (Branker 59–66). Functional impairments from TBI, irritability, and “problems with impulse control” can surface “during times of fatigue and stimulus overload” (Vance and Miller 46). In rare instances, upon hearing a sudden, loud noise in class, some veterans have hit the floor. What do you say then, as everyone is staring? One veteran told me not to ask if the person is OK, but give him or her a minute to get it together. But a counselor would be your best resource.
4. Be sure to set some ground rules for class discussions and online comments.
5. Be careful of your own comments, written and oral.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WRITING PROGRAM ADMINISTRATORS

1. Find out how many veterans are at your institution, where the VA center is and the contact person, counselors, and emergency phone number.
2. Read David Finkel’s *The Good Soldiers* for a real understanding of soldiers’ day-to-day ordeals in Afghanistan. Read about the hardships of army wives in *You Know When the Men Are Gone*. Or *Sand Queen*, a story of a young Iraqi woman and a female U.S. Army specialist. These are all important perspectives (see Recommended Further Reading at end).
3. Design professional development sessions for faculty and tutors to understand expectations of veterans, learn available institutional services, how TBI and PTSD can affect the processes of writing and interpersonal skills, and ways to recognize signs of distress or when they could pose a hazard. Include veterans to speak to issues of class discussion. Ask counselors to sit in.
4. Attend the Veteran’s SIG, and special sessions at next year’s CCCC convention.
5. Watch for 4 C’s Veterans Committee’s white paper: “Best Practices for Assisting Vets Transition into Academic Culture with a focus on Writing Programs”

6. Look for the forthcoming anthology edited by Sue Doe called: *Generation Vet: Composition, Veterans, and the Post-9/11 University* for related topics.

To close, I want to acknowledge that coming to college is an adjustment for returning veterans and for us. Last year, Hart and Thompson reported that 92% of the college writing instructors surveyed did not have training to “understand veterans’ issues in the classroom.” With attention, our perceptions, awareness, and practice can reverse that number. As writing instructors and program administrators, we have a great responsibility. We meet students where they are, whoever they are, and we work with them to become more competent and confident writers. So, for our student veterans, I’ll ask you to be especially mindful. Be an ally. And help them be all they hope to be.

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