A New Generation of WAVES:

Writers Adapting to Veteran Educational Status

D. Alexis Hart
Allegheny College
As is the case with other minority student populations, the scope of veteran experiences is substantial.

Research on current student veterans has revealed that many veterans feel as if college professors lack an understanding of the diversity of the veteran student population. As one young veteran remarked, “Most professors would claim to embrace diversity among the student population, but some would like to exclude veterans from the multiplicity list due to our war service” (qtd. in Elliott, Gonzalez, and Larsen 287). Daniel Byman, Senior Fellow for Foreign Policy at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy, has also observed that “many professors harbor stereotypes about the military, not recognizing the diversity of opinion within military circles on many issues and the remarkable minds of many young soldiers.” However, as Mark Bauman explains, “learning about the military, war and combat, and servicemembers’ experiences [can actually] complement a campus’s broader commitment to diversity and social understanding” (31).
Many returning veterans are still likely to “experience culture shock resulting from the stark contrast between the military world and civilian institutions such as higher education” (Zinger and Cohen 39). As they transition from their military commands to college campuses, student veterans are leaving a world in which “authority is absolute, responsibility for actions lies in the hands of superiors and... the rules are clear” (Zinger and Cohen 39-40). Therefore, for many veterans, the relative autonomy of life as a college student requires significant adjustments.

In the military, rules are well documented and orders are absolute. In civilian life in general, in academic settings, and in youth cultures, the rules may change from day to day, there may be “unwritten rules” that everyone is supposed to “just know,” and there may be unspoken distinctions between the rules that everyone has to follow and those that one can get away with not following. For service members and veterans, whose success and survival have often depended on structure and discipline, this can be very frustrating.

As Rosalind Loring and her colleagues discovered when developing a program in the 1970s to prepare Vietnam veterans for college courses at UCLA, “[They want] to be respected for their experience and accomplishments in the service, but at the same time they [lack] self-confidence in academic skills.” Consequently, they often request that their professors provide them with “specific assignments, explicit standards, and stated expectations for behavior” (Starr 246).

Candid and accurate feedback—even when negative—from someone they trust.

Clear end-goals and rationales for assignments and grading criteria. Concrete and
"Believing war is beyond words is an abrogation of responsibility—it lets civilians off the hook from trying to understand, and veterans off the hook from needing to explain. **We can do better.**"
—Phil Klay, 2014

"[W]hat if individuals decide to describe traumatic events? In what manner do we respond on paper, or in person? I have always espoused that **we are not trained therapists**; however, we do have an ethical obligation to react responsibly."
—Marilyn Valentino, 2010

"The subject of war and its effects can easily tip over into a dramatic focus on the negative or a stereotypical portrait of service members and veterans as dangerous, unstable, or objects of sympathy. The best focus will emphasize respect for these individuals, appreciation for their service, welcome within the civilian community and academic community, and belief in their strength and potential."—Woll, "Teaching America's Best"
Trigger Warnings

“Since triggers are a contagious phenomenon, there will never be enough trigger warnings to keep up with them. It should not be the job of college educators to foster this process.

It would be much more useful for faculty members and students to be trained how to respond if they are concerned that a student or peer has suffered trauma. Giving members of the college community the tools to guide them to the help they need would be more valuable than trying to insulate them from triggers.”

—Sarah Roff, 2014

Trigger warnings:
"I have enormous sympathy for students who arrive on college campuses suffering from the aftereffects of childhood trauma as well as for returning veterans trying to go back to school burdened by symptoms of PTSD. The solution is not to help these students dig themselves further into a life of fear and avoidance by allowing them to keep away from upsetting material. I am also skeptical that labeling sensitive material with trigger warnings will prevent distress. The scientific literature about trauma teaches us that it seeps into people’s lives by networks of association. Since triggers are a contagious phenomenon, there will never be enough trigger warnings to keep up with them. It should not be the job of college educators to foster this process.”—Roff
Syllabus Statement

“I recognize the complexities of being a student veteran. If you are a student veteran, please inform me if you need special accommodations. Drill schedules, calls to active duty, complications with GI Bill disbursement, and other unforeseen military and veteran-related developments can complicate your academic life. If you make me aware of a complication, I will do everything I can to assist you or put you in contact with university staff who are trained to assist you.”

— Katt Blackwell-Starnes
Hart and Thompson’s 2011 survey of 450 WPAs and writing instructors revealed that 92% of respondents had received no training for understanding veterans’ issues in the writing classroom, and 70% of the respondents’ departments or programs had not discussed in a formal way the effect of veterans in the writing classroom, despite the fact that 45% of respondents indicated that they had specifically noticed an increase in student veterans in their classes.

A follow-up survey conducted by the CCCC’s Task Force on Student Veterans in 2013 showed that 85% of respondents still had received no training on veterans’ issues.
“Institutions that enrolled military service members, veterans, or dependents reported offering training for faculty or staff in mental health issues associated with military service (21 percent), physical health issues resulting from military service (14 percent), and student transition from military life to civilian life (21 percent).

Questionnaires were mailed to approximately 1,650 public and private Title IV eligible, degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the 50 states and the District of Columbia. The cover letter indicated that the survey was designed to be completed by the person(s) most knowledgeable about services and support programs for military service members and veterans at the institution. Respondents were offered the option of completing the survey via the Web. The unweighted survey response rate was 93 percent and the weighted response rate using the initial base weights was 90 percent.”

DOE
Veteran-to-Veteran Tutoring

Veterans' Writing Groups
Works Cited


Novacek-Cleary, Michelle and Kathleen Warzick. “Veterans as Adult Learners in Composition Courses.” Composition Forum 28 (Fall 2013). Web.


