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Charlie, Mike, Victor: Student Veterans' Loss of Purpose

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Abstract

As student veteran populations and visibility have increased on campus, several scholars have explored how higher education works (or fails to work) to serve those who have served their country. In military radio jargon, “Charlie Mike” means, “continue the mission.” In this study, the mission was transitioning to, and persisting through college, and the participants were Student-Veterans and Service-Members (SVSM), a term coined by Arminio, Grabosky, and Lang (2015). Thus, “Charlie Mike Victor” focuses on the continuation of the mission for several “victors”—the phonetic “v” in “Victor” here meaning “veterans.” In this study, the concept of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2007; Baxter Magolda & King, 2012) was combined with Schlossberg’s (1981) transition theory to explore the experiences of SVSM in higher education. This study seeks to build on the existing scholarship and more fully explore the role of various identities in the experience of SVSM.

Keywords: student veterans, transition, higher education

Introduction

In military radio jargon, “Charlie Mike” is a common phrase meaning “continue the mission.” The practice is comparable to acronyms used in text messaging. For this phrase, the words are assigned letters “C” and “M” of the phonetic alphabet. When used, the phrase indicates there is work that remains to be done and a particular unit should continue its mission. In relation to this study, the mission was transitioning to and persisting through college, and the unit was college-going student combat veterans.

The research participants were military-affiliated and were not simply in pursuit of academic goals; participants were also in pursuit of their personal goals—their personal missions. Additionally, these missions were being undertaken through a transition not only in the mission, but also through a transition in the identity of the participants. Thus, this study – “Charlie Mike Victor” focuses on the continuation of the mission for several “victors” – the phonetic “v” in “Victor” here meaning “veterans.” How Charlie Mike (continue the mission) participants navigated their Victor (veteran) identities is a key element in this study.

Learning the language of our student veterans requires more than the phonetic alphabet, however. There are a variety of terms and a range of phrases scholars doing this work must understand. To begin with, what to even call military-affiliated personnel in higher education is a challenge. According to Arminio, Grabosky, and Lang (2015), the term Student-Veterans and Service-Members (SVSM) describes this population by including students who are serving in active duty or in the National Guard/Reserves, as well as veterans of the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard (p. xiv). For the purposes of this study, we used the term SVSM. More discussion on how this research team navigated military vocabulary and shorthand is discussed in the “Design and Methods” section that follows.

Transition of Mission

SVSM populations on campus have increased in recent years. According to Hammond (2015), “Similar to veterans of the post-World War II era, student veterans are returning to higher education from contemporary conflicts in record numbers” (p. 146). As student veteran populations and visibility have increased on campus, scholars have explored how higher education works (or fails to work) to serve those who have served their country.

In order to explore this subject, it is important to have a clear definition of the term “transition.” Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn (2010) defined transition as “any event, or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles” (p. 256). The choice of this definition is important for two reasons. First of all, Evans et al. (2010) stressed that their emphasis was not on the actual transition, but on how individuals react to the transition. This definition of transition fits well with the use of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2007; Baxter Magolda & King, 2012) described below as a conceptual roadmap for this study. Additionally, the ability of individuals to take stock of their strengths influences their ability to cope with transition (Evans et al., 2010). This understanding has informed the dialogue we engaged in with SVSM in this study.

The transition to higher education can be challenging for any new student. The experiences of SVSM add levels of complexity to this process. Existing research has discussed SVSM transitions and support systems (Arminio, Grabosky & Lang, 2015; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Livingston, Scott, Havice, & Cawthon, 2012). These studies focused on campus resources and how veterans navigated a shift from military service to higher education. Hammond’s (2015) work focused on combat veterans in a community college setting, and in it he called for additional research related to social systems to provide insight into the student veteran experience. This study is a response to the need for more scholarship to provide insight into the experiences of and strategies to support SVSM as they transition out of the military into higher education.

Transition of Identity

There remains a gap in how SVSM make meaning of their multiple, competing identities: student, partner, parent, employee, identities related to race, gender, and other categories, but with a significant gap in relation to Charlie Mike participants’ veteran identities. This study seeks to build on the existing scholarship and more fully explore the role of various identities in the experience of SVSM.

Charlie Mike Victor as Researcher

In addition, the inclusion of a student veteran as a part of the research team provides additional insight, sense of trust, and opportunities for dialogue previously unexplored. Huberman and Miles (2005) stressed the importance of trust in the qualitative interview process. Having a shared experience and perspective—not only as a veteran, not only as a combat veteran, and not only in terms of familiarity with higher education—but as a current combat SVSM helped foster ease of communication and openness related to experiences of participants.

According to Maxwell (2013) personal experiences related to research can provide valuable insights about the phenomena being studied. In the case of this study, the research team was balanced by also including multiple researchers who were not veterans or military-affiliated. Critical questions were asked as the team worked through the data, coded, and developed themes. Ongoing reflective practice, team debriefings, and dialogue were incorporated throughout the research team’s

work together. This positionality is important to the process of this study, but also needs to be interrogated for the bias that it could bring to the scholarship. According to Bourke (2014):

Identities come into play via our perceptions, not only of others but of the ways in which we expect others will perceive us. Our own biases shape the research process, serving as checkpoints along the way. Through recognition of our biases, we presume to gain insights into how we might approach a research setting, members of particular groups, and how we might seek to engage with participants. (p. 1)

In the case of this project, the researchers made their backgrounds known to the participants. Time was spent understanding the experiences of the SVSM research team member before the interviews were started. Before, during, and following the interviews, the team engaged in extensive reflection on how the SVSM researcher's identity and experiences not only informed the study, but also may have created bias in the analysis of the data collected. The fact that team included non-SVSM researchers as well, helped to further explore and expose potential biases.

Combat Veteran Focus

Finally, this study is unique not only in that it includes the SVSM perspective as a part of the research team, but also in its explicit focus on combat veterans. While other studies have explored the combat veteran experience as it relates to transitioning to higher education (DiRamio, Ackerman & Mitchell (2008); Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010), this study is the first to combine this scholarship with a fellow SVSM as a part of the research team. By fully addressing the Charlie Mike Victor experience with the inclusion of a Charlie Mike with a common experience, the goal was to cultivate a space and dialogue related to combat experiences that could inform higher education faculty, staff, and administrators about ways to support SVSM on campus.

Framework and Theory

Self-Authorship

As a higher education professional—whether faculty or staff member—understanding how SVSM make meaning of their experiences is important. College staff and faculty need to understand how to provide the necessary support to SVSM in their transitions to higher education. Simply getting veterans into higher education is not enough. It is essential to student veterans' success that institutions develop an understanding of their needs, experiences, and challenges in order to develop communities and systems of support to enhance SVSMs' sense of belonging.

One way of exploring these experiences is through the lens of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012). This approach was chosen for our study because of the importance of individuals in determining the meaning of their own experiences. As related to this study, this is of particular importance in terms of empowering the participants as experts and co-researchers.

SVSM carry the expertise and specific insights that not only helped guide the authors of this study, but also the valuable knowledge to guide practitioners in higher education. SVSM are uniquely positioned to articulate their experiences before, through transition into, and during their experiences in higher education. As they make the move from military serviceperson to college student, a refocusing of the mission from the "we" to the "me" is essential. Self-authorship is a powerful tool for fostering this reflection and meaning-making.

Baxter Magolda and King (2012) argued that "[w]ithout a means to access and assess students' meaning making, researchers are at a disadvantage in deciding how to interpret their academic performance and other behaviors, and educators are at a disadvantage in translating findings into the design of programs and services" (p. 3). This is essential to our study and new ways

of engaging with SVSM as they make meaning of past and present experiences in the process of achieving academic and personal goals.

The transition into the college environment is a key aspect of any student's experience and this is no less true of the SVSM experience. Both Baxter Magolda (2007) and Baxter Magolda and King's (2012) theory of self-authorship and Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory provided frameworks to guide this current research. Coping with transition is an important step in one's personal identity development. As Baxter Magolda (2014) pointed out, "the college experience inevitably calls for reconsideration of one's role and responsibility in the world" (p. 25). Barber, King, and Baxter Magolda (2013) coined the term self-authorship to mean "consider[ing] multiple perspectives, reflect[ing] on.... values and motivations, and utiliz[ing] goals and perspectives that are internally grounded and evaluated as a foundation for meaning making" (p. 870). Therefore, self-authorship encompasses taking one's previous knowledge, experiences, and opinions, evaluating them against other perspectives, and making meaning understood by the individual (Barber et al., 2013).

Reaching a point of self-authorship can be challenging for SVSM because of the drastic environmental shift between combat and campus ("Ideas for a Self-Authorship Curriculum," 2011). Many SVSM do not come to campus as teenagers, but the framework with which they approach higher education is similar to their younger classmates. The Association for Higher Education reported, "[w]hether a traditional-age student or a young adult now home from war service, entering college students' epistemologies are typically dualistic and absolute, because they have been adapted from external sources of authority (parents or the military culture)" ("Ideas for a Self-Authorship Curriculum," 2011, p. 83). The first step in moving students toward self-authoring their own meaning is challenging them to think critically (Baxter Magolda, 2014, p. 25).

In the case of this study, SVSM are required to move beyond a dualistic, hierarchical meaning making of their work and environment. This transition is more than a developmental shift; it also requires SVSM to shift in focus from a military context focused on commands, a focus on the team, and common goals. Instead, SVSM are being asked to set their priorities, they are moving toward a self-orientation, and must focus on individual goals in higher education. In other words, in order to transition and engage in self-authorship, the self must become a new, different, and sometimes uncomfortable focus.

Transition Theory

While self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2007, 2014; Baxter Magolda & King, 2012) provided the frame, Schlossberg (1981) provided a theory to navigate the specific context. In the case of this study, participants were facing an anticipated (rather than unanticipated or non-event) transition; they were shifting from the military to becoming college students. Moving beyond the surface of the transition, it is important to understand how Schlossberg's (1981) factors for coping with transition align so clearly with the self-authorship theory. These factors include: situation, self, social support, and strategies. For the purposes of this study, each of these areas needs to be further defined and understood.

Situation is the least complex of these four factors. The situation for this study is that SVSM were enrolled as college students. While the situation conceptually is not complicated, understanding the transition from an SVSM's previous primary affiliation with the military to being a college student provides challenges as articulated by participants in this study.

Self is the next factor in Schlossberg's (1981) theory and is a central aspect of the transition experiences explored in this study. Some of the aspects of self to which Schlossberg (1981) referred are socioeconomic status, ego development, and how an individual views life. In the context of

SVSM, the socioeconomic experience can be different—particularly for those who were employed full-time in the military and then leave that role to become full-time students. The affects to one's ego and identity are important considerations. In addition, in keeping with the title of this study, the context of the mission is made more complicated. In many instances, military personnel are given specific instructions and directions with some limitations on personal choice in achieving articulated goals. In the context of one's education, SVSM are now the ones determining not only how to achieve the mission, but also what the mission itself is. Again, it is important to stress that this element—the “self” factor—aligns well with the self-authorship framework.

Moving beyond the self to the social support factor (Schlossberg 1981), we can see that the transition is particularly challenging. Just as the mission is often pre-determined for the SVSM, so is there a network of support provided in the military role. Finding new networks among other students where experiences are not shared in the same way as with military peers is a challenge to be considered. Additionally, the support from family may be different than in the past—either due to access or due to experiences of family members in higher education. That said, the institution of higher education is designed to provide different types of social support than the military as well.

Finally, strategies or coping responses are essential to the transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981). The situation, the problem, and the stress associated with transitions are key elements of this factor. In the context of this study, SVSM sought ways to modify the situation (manage the transition) in order to be successful in this new setting. By utilizing reflection and engaging in practices related to self-authorship, participants articulated an ability to use existing skills and previous experiences to navigate higher education. Finally, as with any transition, issues of stress were identified and participants discussed ways in which they managed stress, or ways in which they struggled to manage the stress related to the changing context and issues of identity.

When utilized together, the work of Baxter Magolda (2007), Baxter Magolda and King (2013), and Schlossberg (1981) provide an important and appropriate way of examining the experiences of SVSM in higher education. As the number of combat veterans enrolling in higher education increases, it is essential to examine their experiences in order to provide support for SVSM through enrollment, retention efforts, and on to graduation and employment. This new perspective contributes to the existing body of literature based on similar studies (Arminio, Grabosky & Lang, 2015; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Livingston, Scott, Havice, & Cawthon, 2012). Research is expanding on SVSM, the transition to college, and students' making meaning of their lived experiences.

However, a vital piece is missing regarding SVSM, which is how these elements relate to one another. SVSM hold multiple identities (student, partner, parent, employee, identities related to race, gender, etc.). In addition, there are a number of ways in which these multiple identities can compete with one another in academic and other settings; therefore, a need for deeper understanding of the individual is a key to ensuring SVSM success on campus.

Without understanding how SVSM view themselves in settings of higher education, student affairs practitioners are not adequately equipped to support this sub-population. All aspects of support may need to be provided in different formats in order to best serve the needs of SVSM. Examples of this include: classroom settings (seating arrangements, expectations for engagement in dialogue), social and student organizational involvement opportunities (designed to cater to older students who may have families or other obligations that traditionally aged college students do not have), and academic and other support structures (uniquely designed ways of encouraging SVSM to get academic or other support needed in order to be successful on campus).

Our study explored the experiences of veterans transitioning into the higher education experience, with a focus on how student-veterans sought to define their identities and establish their

purpose after serving in the military. The research addresses how higher education institutions affect their experiences and to what extent their transitions impacted the process of the self-authorship of their identity. Ultimately, this study sought to understand the mission of SVSM as they transitioned from one setting to another and navigated issues related to their individual identities in the process.

Design and Methods

A constructivist framework was used to develop this qualitative study of Charlie Mike Victor. As such, a focus on the socially-constructed truth of participants was privileged. The truth based on “the experiences, background, perceptions, and thought processes” was the focus for the research team when engaging with participants (Manning, 1999, p.13).

A qualitative approach was chosen as this study called for flexibility and adaptability with the participants. In choosing self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2007, Baxter Magolda and King, 2013), doing qualitative work was particularly appropriate. Given the nature of one controlling the narrative around one’s own experience, as researchers it was essential that we allow the participants to dictate what information was shared and in what ways.

The use of semi-structured interviews afforded both the participants and the researchers tremendous flexibility (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). Rather than being limited to a specific scripted set of questions, the researcher questions served to start the dialogue and then allowed the participants to tell their stories and share their experiences. Researchers were then able to ask additional questions to delve more deeply into the participants’ experiences. This afforded the study tremendous depth (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) and encouraged participants to elaborate on particular issues, events, and experiences (Dornyei, 2007).

Additionally, the study required space for multiple perspectives and new questions to emerge. As Maxwell (2013) stated, qualitative research is based on process—examining the world in terms of people (SVSM), situations and events (attending college), and processes (transition from military to higher education).

Case study was chosen as the study examines multiple participants’ meaning-making of a contemporary phenomenon in a current and real-life context (Yin, 2014). Specifically, this study looks at how SVSM made meaning of their transitions into higher education. Case study aligns with the self-authorship approach as well given both focus on the meaning making of participants (case study) by participants (self-authorship).

Similarly, a narrative research approach was appropriate for this study. Like both the phenomenological perspective and self-authorship ((Baxter Magolda, 2007, Baxter Magolda and King, 2013), narrative research focuses on the shared experiences of participants (Creswell, 2014). Through interviews, participants shared information on identity disruption through descriptions of their experiences transitioning from active duty service members to college students.

Researcher Positionality

In phenomenological research and qualitative research in general, it is essential to be transparent in the roles, experiences, perspectives, and identities of the research team. This is true because the information shared by participants is coded, analyzed, and interpreted by the researchers. Five members of the research team were white females while the fifth member was a white male. All were engaged in work related to higher education as practitioners or faculty members and worked directly with undergraduate students, graduate students, or both.

A key element to this study was the intentional inclusion of an SVSM in the research team. One member was a Charlie Mike Victor himself—a (graduate) student veteran at the time of the study. This member was specifically crucial to the study as he afforded an opportunity to cultivate a

sense of trust and common ground with participants from the start. His participation also afforded the team a chance to “speak the vernacular” of the study participants. Rather than asking them to define vocabulary, acronyms, or slang specific to the military experience, participants were able to share their thoughts and experiences with very limited interruptions for clarification.

In addition, the SVSM team member had navigated the same transitions at the same institution as the study participants. This afforded him a chance to ask questions that those outside of the experience may have failed to ask or to provide context and insight that someone else may not have been familiar with. These identities were made clear to all participants in order to be both transparent and collaborative with the SVSM who chose to be a part of this study.

Participants, Research Setting, & Data Collection

The participants in this qualitative study consisted of four student-veterans, three men and one woman, from a population of approximately 250. All of the participants in this study served at least one combat tour. While individuals played different roles in combat, having served in that capacity is an important element. Not only does this set aside this study from some others, which may focus on veterans but not combat veterans explicitly, but also this study seeks to further unpack the transition processes of combat SVSM.

Participants included two full-time undergraduates, one full-time graduate student, and one part-time graduate student. Participants’ ages ranged from 26 to 42. Two participants described their race as Caucasian, one as Caucasian and Asian, and one as multi-ethnic. All participants had been deployed overseas within the previous five years. One participant was currently active in the reserves; two served in the Air Force, and two in the Marines.

The research site was a large (20,000+ student body population), four-year, public land-grant research university located in the Southeast. The institution relied on self-identification and the Veterans Affairs Certifying Official (VACO) to track Student-Veterans and Service-Members (SVSM). The VACO sent SVSM on campus a recruitment e-mail for the study, therefore utilizing convenience sampling. However, exact numbers of SVSM were unknown on campus due to SVSM partial invisibility on campus, or “social camouflage” (Livingston et al., 2012).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted for this phenomenological study from a script with questions guided by “Baxter Magolda’s Self-Authorship Interview” (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007). The researchers asked SVSM to explain their personal experiences and their identity development through their beliefs, self-concepts, and relationships with others (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007).

Trustworthiness

Multiple strategies were used to ensure the trustworthiness and authenticity of the collected data. Prior to engaging with participants, outside experts related to the experiences of students in transition and SVSM were enlisted to review the interview questions for inaccuracies. Researchers conducted member checking by following up with participants to provide them with their individual responses. Participants were then invited into a dialogue in order to clarify or add additional thoughts and perspectives. A research team member who identified as a SVSM provided further clarification throughout the development of the research protocol, the development of interview questions, and the data analysis process.

Additionally, after researchers transcribed the recorded interviews, all interviewers reviewed the transcripts. Each transcript was open coded by research team members in order to identify themes. A consistent set of themes was identified by the research team through the coding of the transcripts and the data analysis. Consistency was determined when each interviewer compared their

themes to other researchers' notes. Three themes and two sub-themes emerged: loss of purpose, military influence, and disconnect to campus were primary themes. The idea of being disconnected from campus also included the subthemes related to transition around orientation to education and the utilization of social camouflage in a higher education setting. These will be explored in depth through the rest of this article.

Results

The Charlie Mike Victor (SVSM) participants in this study shared a variety of perspectives and experiences related to their transitions from active military to university student. As is made clear from their own statements and observations, these transitions were not solely about location or assignment, but cut to the heart of their senses of self and their senses of purpose. While SVSM did not give up their identities as service members, they did find their service identities changed as they transitioned into their new roles in college. They also shared thoughts about their struggles to adopt/adapt to identities and goals as students.

Loss of Purpose

The primary presentation of this struggle was related to a loss of purpose expressed by the participants. This is an important and unique finding in this study. The use of self-authorship paired with transition theory afforded this theme an opportunity not only to emerge, but also to be explored in great detail. While in the military, goals, tasks, and projects were clearly outlined, that was not the experience of participants as college students.

This lack of a defined sense of purpose was exacerbated by a contrast between the military and higher education (military influence) and participants' lack of connection at the institution. These surfaced as the other two key themes of the study. In addition, the disconnect with campus was a perceived lack of thorough orientation to the higher education setting and the use of social camouflage related to their veteran status. The disconnection to campus began with their [lack of] orientation to education in stark contrast to the intentional and ongoing development of connections to units or groups during military service. The sense of disconnect is further complicated by the expressed desire of participants *not* to identify as veterans—or their choice to don social camouflage to hide that part of themselves from the larger educational community.

Loss of purpose was a primary theme that emerged from this study. In discussing this part of their experiences, participants felt a lack of stimulation, engagement, and challenge in their academic work compared to their military responsibilities. While in the military, expectations and goals were clearly outlined, and there were clear demarcations of success. In college, the sense of purpose was less clear from an organizational perspective. There was a shift from an organizational/institutional/team vision of achievement to one solely focused on the individual which ran contrary to participants' past experiences.

One participant discussed how his move into higher education changed his self-perception and his identity in terms of how those around him saw and experienced him. Andrew described feeling a transition from being “one of the focal points for leadership in your military organization to just a guy walking around campus ... going to class.” He shared that in the military he had a clear role to play whereas at the university there was less direction and as a result less of a sense of connection to the organization. His purpose was neither specifically defined nor explicitly aligned with larger goals and purposes as it had been in the military.

Other Charlie Mike Victors also shared that their connection with their military identities and organizations were much stronger than their sense of connection with their college campus. In the military, they were identified specifically in an organizational context, their roles were made clear,

and the goals were clearly articulated. Similarly, there were specific measures for success (or failure) related to a larger purpose or outcome.

Another participant, Meg, talked about a lack of structure in this transition: "I'm totally unfocused ... I think it's because of years of, not necessarily like micromanaged checklists, but like, 'Ok here, you have to commission as many people as possible into the United States Air Force.' 'Okay, that's what I'll do.'" While the degree to which a sense of loss related to purpose upon leaving the military varied, all participants clearly articulated this sense of loss as a major challenge in their transitions into higher education. Going from a group- and team-oriented set of goals and measurable outcomes driven by the military institution to individual goals driven primarily by students themselves was an obstacle to be overcome.

Military Influence

Beyond the shift from external to internal goal setting, the military experience of participants further influenced their day-to-day navigation of the campus setting. The interviewees described themselves as goal- and task-oriented because of the lasting *military influence* on their character. Dirk discussed the differences between his behavior and that of traditional, non-SVSM students, "... there's some days you'll go in ... and you'll slice the room, you'll want your back to the wall ... it's just a different mindset, completely." The quote revealed a mindset that SVSM have when re-entering civilian life after combat. Participants shared that their military and combat experiences can affect how they navigate educational environments on a physical level in terms of assessing the space, placing oneself into the space, and being aware of options for escape. That said, SVSM students' engagement goes well beyond the physical space itself and affects how they choose to participate (or not) in classrooms and other settings on both an intellectual, but also an emotional level.

A key theme within the military influence aspect of this study emerged when SVSM talked about the role of the military in their personal histories. Participants discussed the military's influence on their career progression. While it had a significant impact on their identity and how they navigated spaces and interactions, participants explained that ultimately the military was just a job. While they felt a sense a connection and purpose in the military, the participants did not join the service to be heroes; instead they took the job, while navigating their career paths.

Meg described her experience this way: "[i]t was a good job. I'm glad that people think that it's some high and mighty thing, but I don't think that it is. I think it is just something that I did." The SVSM interviewed were humble about their experiences, explaining that to them, serving in the military was only a chapter of their lives. Andrew explained the shift in his identity from military to post-military in this way:

I'm never just going to be like, well "I'm a Marine!" I mean now like, "I'm a mechanical engineer. Oh, I was in the Marines, yeah, I did that, but I'm doing this now." It was a chapter, not the spine.

The feelings these students had related to their service left them in a space between what they did before and what they do now, further complicating their experiences in college. In many ways, they wanted to move on to what was next for them professionally, but the inability to fully disengage from their previous identities lingered. Both of the quotes above indicate not only the humility the SVSM in this study carried with them, but also the expectations of the world around them as they moved into a new experience. Participants shared that they were seen as different because of what they had done previously. That specifically set them apart from the higher education organization rather than integrating them into the organization in the ways that they experienced the military.

Disconnected to Campus

The lack of integration and the struggle SVSM shared about defining themselves with their military service as a part of who they are, but not their sole identity contributed to a lack of connection in higher education. This finding aligns with the work of Kelley, Smith, and Fox (2013) who reported that SVSM experience a sense of isolation lacking connections to students, faculty, staff, and the social and academic aspects of their higher education institutions. Participants expressed feeling disconnected to campus in part due to the age difference between them and traditional aged students. Clark shared that in seeking out campus involvement, “I consciously made an effort to go out of my way ... to meet people. I am trying to have ... a normal college experience.” Clark, who was closer in age to traditional students than other participants, spoke of seeking membership in organizations besides the Student Veterans Association (SVA).

Meg also described the difficult transition to being a student. She was older than most of her peers and some instructors. She shared that, “there is nothing we can do about being older than everybody else. ... I feel in the middle of everybody and sort of not connected with anybody.” Meg believed her classmates assumed she was a “housewife with nothing else to do,” rather than a retired servicemember; thus, not only not knowing her own identity, but imposing a different identity upon her. Meg’s comments also highlight a stereotypical view of student veterans being male. The male participants did not share this same “reassigned identity” aspect.

Similarly, Andrew spoke about how others defined him, categorized him, and put him in certain boxes based on their observations of him, rather than by learning his story. He shared that the disconnection with higher education is not solely about veteran status. He highlighted a number of identities (that align with self-authorship elements) that separated him and created distance not only between him and other students but also created distance between him and his institution:

You add in, you know, the liberal, the brown, the veteran, the older, you start adding all these up and you find so many ways to not even, not always, self-segregate, but automatically be segregated from the rest of the student population.

For Andrew, Meg, and other participants, the campus focus on observations, assumptions, and the compartmentalization was troubling. The mislabeling of other students, faculty, and staff without understanding all aspects of Charlie Mike Victor identities created obstacles to participants feeling a sense of belonging in higher education and a sense of connection on their specific campus. While being SVSM was only a part of participants’ identities, it was an important part.

As the following sections further outline, SVSM status complicated the higher education experiences of participants. Their sense of disconnect with the campus was exacerbated by a different orientation to education than many of their peers combined with a need to hide part of who they were. Just as being in the military was a job, being in college was a step to the next job—rather than an experience in and of itself. In addition to their different motivations for being in college, participants felt further disconnected because they were not always their authentic selves—they often chose to hide their veteran status. These elements combined to further marginalize this population from the larger student body and the institution as a whole.

Orientation to Education. Several participants described their orientation to education as a means to an end, thinking a college degree would help them achieve their next goal. Dirk shared that much of the educational experience was simply a step in his process to achieve his new mission. In this case, the new mission was getting an education. He specifically focused on the lack of purpose of many of his assignments in comparison to his past work. In regard to reading assignments for class and then writing in response to what he had read he said, “I understand their [the books] argument, I just don’t have anything to really add. ... Once again just checking the block.”

Participants expressed that there was a disconnect between their classroom assignments and their lives. This created a sense that there was a lack of significance in completing some assignments for some of their college courses. Dirk added, "Two years ago I was writing a paper that was going to [a General] to affect operations and now, why am I writing this again?" SVSM expressed that their goals were clearly articulated when in the military. At times, even if they did not understand the purpose of a certain task, they had a commitment to the organization and a connection to the military and knew that their work was making a difference and that it mattered. Such was not the case in all of their experiences in college.

Andrew expressed a similar disconnect between his purpose in the military and the purpose of his educational tasks in college. He said, "I used to only be concerned with life or death situations ... [Now] I just need to get through nine thermodynamics problems and turn them in by tomorrow." There was a loss of purpose for these SVSM and their schoolwork lacked apparent application or significance in the larger scheme of their lived experiences.

Participants shared that there were a number of ways that they saw their work as important in the military that were not present in higher education. Some of the indicators of importance included a sense of commitment to a larger team, a clearly articulated purpose, a connection to others working toward common goals, and a system of respect and order. One additional indicator of the importance of what SVSM did in the military was the pressure they felt to perform and to not let their colleagues down. Dirk specifically discussed the critical role of stress in understanding the importance of his work and his contribution to the larger whole.

The things that I miss, this is gonna sound crazy, the stress. I miss the stress, the excitement of it. I think that a lot of what I was doing with Intelligence, especially targeting terrorists, hunting them down was extremely intellectually challenging. As I mentioned before earlier, last semester the only challenging thing I found about my Master's program was the volume of reading. And you know that's one of those things that... for me there's a lot of under-stimulation day to day. I get bored very easy.

Similarly, Meg emphasized the difficulty in focusing on a specific goal or task or objective in the context of being a student.

I'm totally unfocused. Like, especially even with the deciding what to do as a graduate student. It's frustrating... I think because it was so structured and so goal oriented and focused, now that it's gone it's up to me to do that and I'm having a hard time doing it. I hate admitting that, but that's the truth.

These statements reinforce a loss of a sense of purpose. Dirk and Meg stressed the goals of their work in the military and contrasted them against a lack of challenge and stress in their roles as college students. Where there was formerly pressure to achieve specific outcomes that was missing in terms of both clear goals and the stress of achieving those goals.

The challenges expressed by participants in this section highlight the struggle of self-authorship for veterans. First, a shift took place during veteran transitions. The participants began from a position and identity where things were clearly defined and participants were able to articulate an understanding of who they were and how they fit with others in the organization. Next, students' new roles required them to define themselves as separate from what they had known in the past. In addition, through this transition participants expressed a struggle with the lack of structure. As expressed earlier, goals, steps to achieving goals, markers of success and the like are more self-determined (higher education) rather than institutionally dictated (military).

Social camouflage. In addition to a lack of clarity and pressure related to tasks and goals, the participants shared that their lack of a sense of belonging was exacerbated by their decisions to conceal their SVSM status in college. Their decision to not be fully authentic with others created

additional barriers to their ability to connect with the institution and with individuals. Participants in the study discussed how conversations and settings had an influence on their willingness to disclose their SVSM identities.

Andrew recalled: "... if it's a social situation ... I usually beat around the bush. We'll just be normal and then they'll be like, 'Oh, why are you in undergrad at 30?' And now I'm either A) a loser or I spent 9 years in the Marines." Andrew specifically spoke about his discomfort in being forced to reveal his veteran status. He expressed a reluctance to remove his "social camouflage" defined by Livingston, et al., (2012) as the ability to blend in with one's peers, while obscuring aspect(s) of one's identity—in this case, Andrew's military identity.

Similarly, Meg talked explicitly about the putting on of camouflage to fit in and described the process very specifically. She said, "So I wore [school colors], I always wore [school colors] on Fridays. Because I want to be part of this school, ya know. I want to be part of the spirit." In order to blend in, she dressed in school colors on Friday as it was a tradition at her institution and many other students did the same. She put on the camouflage of her new environment so that she could be seen as "part of" not "the other."

In the context of her SVSM identity, Meg was replacing one uniform for another in order to fit in with individuals (other students) and her new institution (college). Traditions expressing school spirit, like the one mentioned above are commonplace at institutions of higher education. Likewise, the individual service branches and their constituent units practice similar traditions designed to bolster the esprit de corps. Thus, Meg was able to maintain her social camouflage while also participating in an activity that, in essence, was familiar to her—donning a uniform.

All participants described hesitation in disclosing their student veteran status in similar situations as college students. Clark explained, "I try to keep [my SVSM identity] a secret as long as possible ... unless it comes up and like I have to say it." This hesitation to own or express a significant part of their identities and experiences creates an obstacle to the self-authorship process. In situations like this, participants are removing a part of their story from what they share with other students, faculty, and staff on campus. Baxter Magolda and King (2012) identify this as a key part of the self-authorship process. Whereas participants may have been truer to their senses of self during their military service, they are now forced back to earlier phases in the self-authorship model as they must define themselves in a new context.

This disruption in the identity formation process is confusing and frustrating for individuals, as exemplified in specific comments outlined above. Participants expressed a need to renegotiate their relationships with both others and institutions, as well as renegotiating their senses of self. Whereas in the past their identities had been founded in a set of existing relationships and a specific context—those things had been disrupted. As a result, participants were being forced to navigate issues of external approval (by individuals and the institution) at the expense of personal identity. New identities were being developed in the context of new relationships on the path to consistency with the participants' internal voices.

Baxter Magolda (2001) specifically outlined these concepts when she wrote about the influence of "external formulas" followed by reaching a crossroads and claiming self-authorship. In the case of these participants, the old external formulas were rooted in the military and their peers/leaders while the new formulas were centered in higher education and college peer expectations and norms. The participants in this study clearly articulated a sense of being at a crossroads in their identity en route to self-authorship. They were navigating their new context and new goals and new identities and these steps were essential before they could develop a clear and revised sense of self.

Rather than self-authoring their experiences, participants shared experiences that highlight their "definition of self through others" and "approval seeking in relationships" (Baxter Magolda &

King, 2012). As Meg said, “Sometimes I don’t want people to know because I want people just to judge me based on my current form. It’s not too hard to *not* talk about it.” Dirk echoed Meg’s comment stating, “sometimes it comes up, sometimes it doesn’t. Most of my classmates know because of things that I’ve brought up in class... [b]ut other times if I forget I’m wearing my Air Force hat [it comes up].” All participants assumed classmates and staff speculated about their life situations due to their ages; however, SVSM still remained reluctant to voluntarily reveal their veteran status.

Charlie Mike Victor participants shared that a distinct relationship exists between social camouflage and campus disconnect. The participants were able to choose when and where to don or remove their social camouflage — action in their own control. However, in other instances their disconnection from campus arose from a variety of external factors beyond their control. In other words, the difference between these two experiences hinged on the concept of agency: what participants were able to control (wearing social camouflage) versus circumstances where participants did not have a choice (disconnection from campus because of age, non-traditional college student experiences, etc.).

Andrew expressed some ambivalence about his own experience saying, “You were just the person that the yellow ribbon sticker was for. You were never a real thing until you show up in a General Engineering class.” Here he articulated the struggle between self-authorship driven by an “internal coherent sense of self” which is focused on the individual combined with “mutuality” which is focused on relationships with others (Baxter Magolda and King, 2012) and a concern about the ways others see or define him on an external basis. The lack of individual agency to define the self to others and in the new institutional context plays an important role in creating disconnect for the participants from the campus at large.

Summary

The findings of this study highlight the key challenges SVSM face in transitioning from the military into higher education. A loss of clear purpose, the military influence, and the experience of a disconnect with campus were prevalent issues related to senses of belonging for the Charlie Mike Victor participants. Student engagement and a sense of belonging at a college or university is critically important to retention and graduation (Tinto, 1987, 1993). This is important for faculty and staff in higher education to know and address in an attempt to support SVSM from admission through graduation.

The transition issues faced by SVSM mirror but are also distinct from traditional students moving into higher education. Just as traditional students seek to develop a sense of identity and use self-authorship strategies to do that so do SVSM engage in identity development. An important difference between the two is that SVSM come into higher education with fully developed senses of self, senses of purpose, and identities. Theirs is not an emergence of a new identity as much as it is a transformation of their existing identity as SVSM. SVSM have already been through the process but now are compelled to go through it again.

In addition, SVSM often do this while utilizing social camouflage. Others may make assumptions about who they are and treat them a certain way — traditional college student or non-traditional / adult-learner student, for example. The reality is their identity is much more complex. An additional result of the use of social camouflage is the fact that not only do students, faculty, and staff make assumptions about the identities of SVSM, but also that other SVSM miss out on the opportunity to be a part of a community through the transition. Faculty and staff who develop strategies to acknowledge SVSM in and around the classroom create opportunities for senses of belonging and even the development of community. Those who make assumptions, mainly that there are not SVSM in their classrooms and other spaces, further marginalize this population.

Limitations

While this work was conducted in partnership with our participants and a number of efforts were made to provide a sense of trustworthiness to the study, there are with this work—as with any—limitations. These limitations include a small sample size, focus at a single institution, and researcher positive bias toward SVSM.

Sample Size

This was developed as a small, focused pilot study. Due to time constraints, convenience sampling was used and the study was limited to four participants from two branches of service. As mentioned, the Charlie Mike Victor participants were, albeit few in number, demographically diverse.

Additionally, the applicability of the findings is impacted by the small sample size. The focus of this project was understanding the specific stories of a few participants in deep and meaningful ways. Because this approach was adopted, the sample size and research design mean that the findings are not applicable in any general sense. The interviews conducted at a single institution are neither representative of all SVSM experiences generally nor are they generalizable to the experiences of SVSM in this particular setting.

Institutional Focus

Additionally, this study was conducted at an institution with a strong military history. This may have had an influence on the experience of participants. Given the visibility of symbols, the provision of support staff specifically-focused on SVSM, and language and traditions celebrating the military and military history of the institution, the experiences of these participants may not represent those at other institutions. Despite senses of disconnection, it is possible that these participants feel more support (even if still not enough support) than SVSM at institutions without these visual elements, traditions, and language honoring the contributions of the armed services. That said, the fact that this research site has such a strong military affiliation and the participants still stressed that they struggled in adapting to the institutional culture is an important finding. What is the experience like for SVSM at institutions with weaker military ties and histories?

Researcher Bias

The research team included one individual who identified as SVSM. While this informed the development of the research protocol and served to build a connection and sense of rapport with participants, it also had an impact on the research team and the study itself. Researchers' positive bias toward SVSM is a limitation that may have influenced the protocol and the coding and data analysis. The Charlie Mike Victor member of the research team may have potentially projected some of his experiences on those of the participants. While the team sought to uncover these kinds of biases, they undoubtedly informed the research process. Ultimately, the goal was to be as transparent as possible about identities and how they informed the work done in this study.

Additionally, while having an SVSM as a part of the research team may have fostered openness in some aspects of the research, it is possible that this researcher's participation may have had other effects on the scholarship. The potential of posturing, in order to appear strong and confident in front of another combat veteran is a possible outcome. Given the results of the study and the ways in which participants identified their struggles, it seems as though they were not inclined to hide the challenges they faced from the interview team. That said, their struggles could also be more significant than the study suggests.

Implications for Higher Education Practice

Despite some limitations, this study is important in informing how faculty and staff in higher education work to support Charlie Mike Victor students and provides insight into the experience of SVSM navigating the change from military to college. Higher education professionals need to understand that SVSM are not anticipating the identity reconstruction perceived to occur in this research. SVSM are not prepared for challenges associated with coming to campus. Their roles and identities have changed, but participants shared that they could not fully understand the weight of this shift until they were in the college setting.

Without an understanding of these issues, it is possible that SVSM will not be retained by institutions. SVSM may have to stop out or drop out in order because they do not feel a sense of connection. SVSM may take longer to complete their degrees due to a lack of purpose or at least due to a less defined purpose than what they experienced in the military. The challenge remains to fully understand SVSM retention and graduation, however. According to research, as few as 33% of colleges and universities track the persistence of SVSM (NASPA, 2013). In addition, the existing scholarship has shown that non-veterans graduate at higher rates than SVSM (Cate, 2014; Kelley, et al., 2013).

Practitioners with knowledge of the issues and experiences described in this study have some insight into how to set up SVSM for success. Being able to articulate what SVSM may experience can help make the experience more transparent. Assuring SVSM that they are not alone in feeling this disconnection can prove empowering. Doing this in community with other SVSM can in and of itself begin to foster a sense of belonging.

In a culture where many SVSM choose to employ social camouflage, having a space where faculty, staff, and most importantly peers understand some of what the transition is like is essential to the success of SVSM. This knowledge can help institutions provide staff, offices, lounge space, SVSM student organizations, specific programming related to SVSM success, and other opportunities. As a result, the culture can begin to be transformed to be a space where SVSM can persist in community to graduation.

Awareness of the SVSM Identity Transition

It is imperative that faculty and staff working in higher education understand that SVSM are navigating a transition that is not only unanticipated but is also uncomfortable at times. As Andrew said:

My priority was being good at my language, so I could stop a massive attack from like overwhelming our base and losing hundreds of lives. And now I'm just like, I just need to get through nine thermodynamics problems and turn them in by tomorrow and like maybe go get tacos for Taco Tuesday...? [Laughter.] It's just kind of weird.

While some Charlie Mike Victor participants shared that their military identities existed primarily in the past—for example, Andrew shared he was a marine, but now he is a mechanical engineer—others saw their experiences and their identities as veterans as more central to who they are. As Meg said, “So it's tricky. It's tricky because it's a really huge part of who I am—not just who I was. It's a part of who I am.” As with any demographic group, it is important to meet these students as individuals and not project generalized assumptions upon them.

Ultimately, what is learned as a result of this study is that SVSM is a group of individuals who are struggling to engage in the self-authorship process. A key challenge for this population is that they are struggling toward self-authorship without a clear vision of who they are, where they are, and where they are headed. This is particularly challenging since in their military experiences they had a much clearer vision of who they were, where they were, and a clearer understanding of their goals. In

the past, their objectives were more structured by others and they understood their roles in the military context whereas being college students they were making decisions about what the goal was, why it mattered, and how they would achieve it. The stakes were simultaneously lower in terms of life / death implications and higher in terms of self-ownership, direction, autonomy, and self-authorship.

Awareness that SVSM Social Camouflage Exists

In addition to an awareness that this transition is taking place, it is important that those working in higher education understand that they may not always be aware of SVSM in their offices and classrooms. Not only is it challenging for student veterans to identify who they are, but also through the use of social camouflage, it becomes tremendously difficult for higher education professionals to identify this population. This is a reflection on campus of a challenge facing us at the national level. Cate (2013) reported that there is no formal federal oversight related to data collection and analysis related to student veterans in academic settings. With that in mind, institutions must develop strategies to identify and support this population in ways that make SVSM comfortable and ways that provide them a sense of control and safety in the process. Examples may include tracking veteran status along with other demographic data.

Social camouflage also makes it difficult for Student Affairs professionals to make SVSM feel connected. Therefore, initiatives should focus on strategies that SVSM can utilize throughout their academic experiences. Additional results of this study showed that SVSM expressed having positive interactions with faculty members. Connecting faculty, other academic staff, student affairs, and campus resources can help provide a foundation for SVSM experiences and a safety net for these students as they navigate their academic careers. Higher education professionals can create meaningful and engaging opportunities for SVSM with diverse experiences.

Creation of SVSM-Specific Spaces

Additionally, creating hubs where student veterans may choose to connect with others who have the shared SVSM experience is important. These spaces give autonomy to SVSM to come and go and participate as they feel comfortable. They also provide a space where there is a common language spoken and the SVSM culture can be fostered within the larger culture of the university.

Given the vast needs of student-veterans, establishing comprehensive veterans' resource centers on campus would also aid in SVSM transitional challenges. These centers can also provide settings where SVSM can feel safe and have a reflective space to make progress toward self-authorship with others going through the same transitions. Resource centers should employ knowledgeable staff to assist students with financial benefits, campus involvement opportunities, academic assistance, as well as career and mental health counseling.

Dialogue Related to SVSM in Higher Education

Finally, as dialogue around veterans and student veterans continues to be a part of the higher education conversation, it is important to pay attention to the ways in which veterans are talked about. Given the social camouflage, a student affairs practitioner, faculty member, and others on campus cannot always know who is in the room when conversations are taking place. It is important to keep in mind that student veterans may be present, but further marginalized and silenced by the nature of these conversations. As Andrew said, "the way they discuss veterans, is either the national hero, or the like oh, the poor victim of the system." It is important to examine ways we invite people into dialogue or put up barriers to them entering conversations in and out of the classroom.

Implications for Future Research

More research is needed to further understand experiences of the growing SVSM population. Several new questions on SVSM identity development arose during the Charlie Mike Victor research. The researchers noted that service occupations and combat experiences may affect post-service identity development in different ways. DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) theorized typologies for SVSM using an adaptation of Marcia's 1996 theory and Jones and McEwen's (2000) multiple dimensions of identity. As a result of this study, researchers found that the Charlie Mike Victor interviews align with Hammond's (2015) Combat Veteran Conceptual Identity Model, which has at its center the core identity components of combat veteran, student, and civilian. This study paid particular attention to the concept of self-authorship and how it further develops these core identity pieces. As a result of this scholarship, a deeper exploration around racial, gender, and other identities will further enhance ways in which higher education can best serve its students. Ultimately, a better understanding of SVSM identity can come through a longitudinal study of the effects of military service on self-authorship.

It is important to note that all of the participants in this study served at least one combat tour. While individuals' experiences varied in scope and intensity, serving in combat further complicated the transition process of these participants. That said, not all student-veterans serve in combat and further research on their experience to identify similar or disparate themes is needed. The experience of SVSM during war as well as during peacetime serves to complicate the roles of higher education professionals as institutions develop sustainable services for the student veteran population. Finally, the fact that the SVSM in this study are all combat veterans makes them a unique subset of the larger SVSM population. More research is needed to identify the ways in which combat and non-combat SVSM needs are similar or different.

Conclusion

This study builds on the existing scholarship related to the transition of SVSM to higher education. With a particular focus on areas related to identity and the loss of a concept of a clear mission, this study found that SVSM are in need of supportive environments that foster both a sense of belonging and a sense of purpose in the academic setting. The fact that this is true in the specific context of an institution with a strong military history highlights the struggle institutions are having supporting these students. The SVSM decision to don social camouflage makes this even more challenging to institutions that may not fully realize the extent of this issue on their individual campuses.

Military service has a significant impact on SVSM identity development. The most notable finding of this study is the significant loss of purpose and identity felt by SVSM when transitioning to college from military service. As Andrew stated,

Right when I got out, I was like 'I don't know how to define myself,' I was lost. I was a Marine. I was a staff sergeant. I was a husband. And then I was like you know I'm none of those things... You were one of the focal points for leadership in your military organization to just a guy walking around campus with a backpack going to class.

Helping SVSM through this identity restructuring is a critical part of ensuring their academic and lifelong success and a key responsibility for higher education institutions admitting and serving student veterans. It is imperative that higher education faculty and staff seek to continue to support the Charlie Mike Victor obtaining their degrees.

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