



Journal of Veterans Studies

How are Institutions of Higher Education Implementing First-Year Transition Courses for Veterans?

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To better support veterans in their transition from the military to college, current literature recommends the use of a first-year transition course. However, it does not suggest how to implement this intervention nor if this tool is indeed effective at increasing retention and persistence toward graduation. In this pilot study, five institutions of various sizes and locations were surveyed to discover common themes related to their courses' structure, objectives, assignments, and assessment practices. The goal of the study was to compile "best practices" among the findings and provide practical application tools for institutions looking to start a course or adapt an existing one.

Keywords: student veterans, higher education, transition course, first-year support program, orientation, social acculturation, academic skills, applying military skills, retention, persistence

Introduction

It is well understood that transition support programs promote the retention and completion of student veterans in higher education (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; DeSawal, 2013; O'Herrin, 2011; Vacchi, 2014). Due to the inherent cultural differences between the military and college, student veterans benefit from targeted support programming that provides an explanation of these distinctions and how to navigate campus (Barry, Whiteman, & Wadsworth, 2014; Cass, 2012; DeSawal, 2013; O'Herrin, 2011; Vacchi, 2014). DeSawal (2013) pointed to many cultural variations (i.e., expectations, structure, and learning outcomes) that can cause incongruence for student veterans in their transition to a college campus. For example, many first-time college students do not expect that the majority of learning occurs outside of the classroom and requires substantial individual effort. While 49% of institutions have established veteran-specific orientations to address some of these differences (McBain, Kim, Cook, & Snead, 2012), this one-time event has its limitations for building connections with student veterans. Veteran program administrators cite student veterans' social acculturation to a civilian campus as a main priority (McBain, Kim, Cook, &

Snead, 2012). Yet, only “37% of postsecondary institutions with services for military students and veterans provide transition assistance” (Lang, Harriett, & Cadet, 2013, p. 9). Extending transition support beyond orientation and into the first-year provides built-in structure that allows for greater visibility of dedicated support staff and more opportunities to build rapport with student veterans. This intentional design encourages student veterans to stay in communication with a knowledgeable support staff member who may be able to assist them in overcoming first-year challenges.

One way to facilitate veterans’ transition and social acculturation into college is to offer a first-year course during the veterans’ initial semester (Whitley, Tschudi, & Gieber, 2013). Such a course has already been shown to be effective at helping traditionally-aged students adjust to college life and improve retention and graduation rates. For example, George Mason University found that 90% of its students who participated in a first-year orientation course returned for their sophomore year and after five years, 75% were still in school or graduated (Cambridge-Williams, Winsler, Kitsantas, & Bernard, 2013). This type of program can easily be adapted to working with at-risk populations, such as student veterans. Depending on the institution and its student veteran population, the size and scope of this class may be different, but it is clear that “direct attention to *transition needs* and *intentional design* of curricula” are essential to promoting student success (Mikelson & Saunders, 2013, p. 153). These two elements, in addition to diligent assessment practices, are necessary for the development of a comprehensive, holistic transition course that adapts to the needs of the population over time.

Simply offering student veterans the same orientation course taken by all first-year students or inviting various campus departments to discuss available resources during each class will not create optimal learning conditions for student veterans for a few reasons. Vacchi (2014) explained that even the youngest veterans still align with adult learners because they tend to be older, married, and/or have children. In addition, their military training and socialization sets their experience apart

from their traditionally-aged peers. Therefore, “traditional approaches to student development, and sometimes classroom instruction, may alienate them” (Vacchi, 2014, p. 115). Instructors must intentionally develop active ways to deliver and process information specific to student veterans as adult-learners. Minnis, Bondi, and Rumann (2013) used adult-learner theory to explain that optimal learning occurs when instructors create a safe place and incorporate activities that allow student veterans, “to reflect, share, and make meaning of their military service as a vehicle that also fosters meaning making related to course content” (p. 203). This theory suggests that students are better able to process and learn the lesson when they can relate the material to their own experience. For example, when teaching students how to write an argumentative paper, instructors can pick a topic relevant to their student veterans (such as second amendment rights, military strategy, Middle East conflicts) in which they have some background knowledge, and ask them to work in groups to brainstorm ideas on both sides of the issue. If the topic (content) of the assignment is uninteresting, or unfamiliar, it might be more difficult for them to focus on *how* to write the paper. However, if they can relate to the content of the assignment, they might be more likely to feel confident engaging in discussion, thereby increasing their understanding of the writing process.

Rather than having veterans participate in an existing first-year seminar (FYS) course with traditionally-aged peers, there should be an exclusive veteran-only offering for several reasons: it fosters social support, a sense of belonging, and learning about the transition experience. Peer support with upperclassman or staff with prior military experience is a vital source of social support during the acclimation process (Abel, Bright, & Cooper, 2013; Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009; Whiteman, Barry, Mrozcek, & Wadsworth, 2013). Even though each person is largely influenced by their branch and type of service, veterans still share in the experience of being in the military and can use it to form connections with other veterans. “Shared experiences are the foundation for peer support, as they foster the initial trust and credibility

necessary for developing relationships in which individuals are willing to open up and discuss their problems despite concerns about stigma” (Money et al., 2011, p. 1). This built-in social support happens naturally as long as there is an opportunity, like a transition course, for student veterans to connect with each other, and in an environment where they feel safe to discuss their concerns or issues.

As described by Minnis, Bondi, and Rumann (2013), social learning theory explains, “people learn from and with each other in social contexts, making meaning from new information presented in light of their lived experiences” (p. 205). When incoming student veterans interact with upperclassman, staff and faculty, it increases their sense of belonging, which in turn, fosters more participation and learning. Furthermore, new students gain a deeper understanding of the collegiate culture and expectations of higher education from the experiences of their peers who have successfully navigated the transition. A first-year transition course can provide many opportunities for interaction, which will not only facilitate the transitional needs of students, but it will also help build a supportive veteran community on campus.

Recommended Content Areas

While the FYS model is effective for traditionally-aged students (Cambridge-Williams et al., 2013) and there are some content areas that are important for all types of students (e.g., learning about various campus resources), there are other areas that need to be modified for this particular adult student population. For example, student veterans might need information on accessing medical services at the VA in addition to the campus health center. Recommended content areas include: navigating the institution, connecting to campus resources, translating military service, re-learning academic skills, and vocational planning (Osborne et al., 2015; Stein-McCormick, Osborn, Hayden, & Hoose, 2013; Whitley, Tschudi, & Gieber, 2013).

As non-traditional students, many student veterans experience difficulty re-learning academic skills (DiRamio et al., 2008; Ackerman et al., 2009, Vacchi, 2014). Student veterans are likely to have a gap of three or more years in their formal education while they served in the military and would benefit from relearning positive academic habits including time management, classroom skills, test-taking skills, writing college papers, study strategies, etc. (Cass, 2012; Vacchi, 2014). Developing time management strategies is especially important in the first semester as student veterans are transitioning from the military's highly structured environment to the relatively low structure of a college campus. Plus, these adult-learners are often managing multiple priorities such as full-time employment or raising a family. Both of which can put additional strain on an already demanding student schedule (Osborne et al., 2015).

Finally, career and education advising during the first semester is an important part of major selection and maximizing VA educational benefits (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2013). Career discernment is a practical and existential concern for today's veterans. The Post 9/11 GI Bill typically covers the cost of tuition for 36 months, or the minimum time needed to achieve a four-year degree. Due to this time constraint, deciding a major and career path early is critical to graduating on-time and minimizing the need for paying out of pocket expenses. Additionally, a 2012 study by the Prudential Foundation cited that 80% of veterans are concerned with finding a job that is meaningful (Prudential Financial, 2012). Career development activities would allow each individual to reflect on their personal situation and decide what a meaningful career would look like and why. Some students may want a job that allows them to spend more time with family, improve society, or travel the world. Yet others' incentive is to be the first in their family to obtain a degree. Whatever the reason, introspection and goal setting can make student veterans' career choice more fulfilling and improve the likelihood of retention and persistence towards a degree. Entire courses on vocational discernment and development have been established at institutions for veterans and non-

veterans to assist in career planning (Stein-McCormick et al., 2013). Introducing career development in the transition class will begin the discernment process earlier and aid in the selection of a suitable major. This knowledge may prevent student veterans from wasting time and educational benefits on unnecessary coursework as well as improve retention when there is a clear pathway for goal completion.

More than simply translating their military occupation specialty (MOS) in civilian terms on a resume, student veterans should explore how skills learned in the military will apply, positively or negatively, in higher education. For example, resiliency training in the military calls for the service member to adapt to stress and adversity. This mentality may help the student veteran to overcome obstacles in times of high stress during the course of a semester. On the other hand, learned behaviors in the military such as directness of communication can be seen as terse or aggressive in the civilian world. Providing an opportunity in the transition course for student veterans to discuss and reflect on different aspects of their lived experience builds self-awareness and increases their ability to communicate their skills in the civilian world.

In fact, 60% of veterans surveyed in 2012 were concerned about translating their military experience into skills desired by civilian employers (Prudential Financial, 2012). In order to break down this perceived barrier, veterans, especially those with a combat MOS, may benefit from an explanation of the underlying “soft skills” that are applicable to their education and career. Some examples of skills include: proactive accountability for expensive equipment, instructing their peers on a variety of topics, and problem solving with very limited resources. Student veterans will gain confidence in their employability if they have identified a repertoire of skills and can practice communicating them with employers, perhaps through networking events, or career fairs. Developing this mentality within the first semester may prevent veterans from solely pursuing a

diploma as a means to an end, but instead focus on the skills and experiences that employers are expecting out of college graduates.

Study Rationale

As described above, current literature offers suggestions about content areas for a transition course. However, scholars do not offer insight into how to implement a veteran-specific transition course, nor do they explain how to assess its effectiveness on retention and student success. This study was designed to help fill the gap in knowledge by surveying several instructors to see how their courses were designed, what structure, objectives, and assignments were most effective. The compilation of these practices would provide practical application tools for the implementation of a new course or adaptation of existing courses.

Within the scope of this study, the researchers also wanted to investigate how these courses might change over time. With this information, faculty or staff who are looking to initiate a new course can benefit from the advanced experience of professionals at other institutions. Finally, the researchers wanted to determine how various institutions assess the impact of their transition course on student veterans' success. Altogether, the data collected would provide a baseline understanding of the structure and content of current transition courses being offered at institutions, identify culturally-specific "best practices," and discover opportunities for further research.

Methods

With the goal of developing a pragmatic approach to the investigation, the pilot study used grounded theory methodology to collect qualitative data and identify major ideas, themes, or concepts from participants. Through convenience sampling, participants were solicited by contacting institutions with established veteran-specific transition courses. Some were referred through contacts in the industry and others were found by researching the internet. Those who participated were asked to share a copy of their current course syllabus and agreed to the audio recording of semi-

structured interviews conducted via phone. Interviews took approximately an hour and questions focused on five main areas about the course: structure, objectives, assignments, assessment, and lessons learned. After all phone interviews were conducted, the researchers transcribed audio recordings and analyzed interview transcripts for recurring themes.

Participants

After contacting qualified participants, five institutions were selected for participation. Although small, the sample of institutions varied by size of veteran program and location within the United States. Three of the participants were categorized as large, public universities with student veteran populations of approximately 150, 350 and 1,100 students. The fourth participant was a medium-sized, public university with approximately 400 student veterans. The fifth participant was a small, private university with a student population of 50 student veterans. The sample represented Southern, Western, Eastern, and Midwestern regions of the United States.

The instructors ranged from a full-time administrator of a veterans resource center, to part-time staff outside of the veterans resource center, and a graduate student serving as a lecturer. Four out of the five instructors are veterans themselves. Additionally, their experience in teaching the course varied from one semester to twelve semesters. All participants agreed to discuss their experiences and gave permission for the results to be shared in an article and/or conference presentation.

Each university offered one or two sections of a veteran-only transition course per semester, categorized under its first-year experience course offerings. The size of each class section varied from four to thirteen students. During the interviews, the term “veteran” was used to describe all variations of military service members including: those fully separated from the military, reservists, national guardsmen, and active duty service members. It also included veterans using or not using education benefits. Each class was inclusive of all types of “veterans,” not segregated by service

component. Colleges and universities should seek to understand the diversity within this student population (DeSawal, 2013), but for the purposes of this study, the term “veteran” is inclusive of all military-affiliated students.

Findings

The purpose of this pilot study was to identify common themes of the transition courses’ structure, objectives, assignments, assessment, and lessons learned. After reviewing the data from each institution, certain trends emerged for each area being investigated, and there were associations found based upon the “experience level” of the course. The results are described in in Figure 1 (below). Some themes are consistent across all institutions, while others fall into a bimodal distribution. For the purpose of describing these findings, the different categories are divided into “advanced experience” and “beginner experience.” Beginner courses had been taught for one semester (two participants in the study), while advanced courses were taught four or more semesters (three participants). For all participants, the instructors remained the same since their initial offering of the course. Due to the small sample size, it is not possible to determine correlation coefficients at a statistically significant level; however, it is clear that there are some consistent relationships throughout the data.

<u>Beginner Experience</u>	<u>Shared Qualities</u>	<u>Advanced Experience</u>
<p>Structure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Closer to a traditional first-year seminar in content • Meets for part of the semester. Ex. first 7 weeks • Instructors tend to be part-time or graduate students • Registration is voluntary • Class size is smaller <p>Objectives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss identity development as college students • Minimal focus on choosing a major or preparing a resume <p>Assignments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 or less assignments that total 100 points or less; participation is large portion <p>Assessments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses required course evaluation to adapt course 	<p>Structure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better for student veterans in first semester • Consistent instructor is necessary to build rapport and trust with students. • Include a peer leader • 1 credit hour is sufficient • Hold class in the early afternoon and in allocated space for veterans • Difficulty in finding relevant textbook <p>Objectives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Orientate to campus • Introduce students to other departments and resources • Refresh academic skills • Connect students to veterans program staff and their peers • Explain VA benefits • Identify goals/plans for the future <p>Assignments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each includes a writing component • Procedural assignments such as attend class, meet with advisor, turn in health forms, etc. • Time management/organization instruction <p>Assessments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses required course evaluation to adapt course • Most important outcome is connecting students to veterans program and their peers 	<p>Structure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deviates from the first-year seminar model • Focuses on connecting students with veteran and non-traditional student to resources • Instructors are full time administrators within veterans services and tend to have strong support from administration • Students are pre-registered • Courses meet 1 or 2 times/week for the entire semester <p>Objectives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss identity development as a student veteran during the transition from the military to civilian life • Includes career and personality assessments to develop self-awareness and choose the appropriate major <p>Assignments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10-14 assignments that total 300 points or more • Written reflection on personal identity either veteran, civilian, or both • Avoid complex, overly taxing reading or writing assignments <p>Assessments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses an additional qualitative assessment for feedback • Track GPA and retention rate differences between students who and do not take the course • Pre and post assessment of the students' career confidence in career preparation

Fig. 1. Similarities and differences between transition courses with beginner (offered for one semester) and advanced-level (offered four or more times) experience.

Course structure

Across the five universities there was general concurrence about some aspects of the course structure. Specific agreement indicated that this type of course is best suited for undergraduate student veterans during their first semester at the university. Though the course can benefit those who have taken college courses at previous institutions, the overall impact of the course may be reduced because the student has already been acclimated to higher education in certain ways. While it is common to have some guest lecturers from other departments/offices, it is important to keep a consistent instructor for a majority of the semester to build rapport with the students. It is also common to have peer leaders assist with instruction and discussion. For the course itself, one credit hour seems to be sufficient, and it is most common for the course to take place in the early afternoon in the same building as the campus veterans' resource center. Each institution incorporates different

reading material, but there was shared sentiment on the difficulty in finding relevant textbooks, and the instructors desire to keep textbook costs low for the students.

Courses with “beginner experience” tend to be closer to the traditional FYS model in structure, content, and meeting time. The classes do not meet every week of the semester; for example, the course consisted of 10 sessions, or only during the first seven weeks of the semester. The instructors for these courses tended to be part-time employees or graduate students, not necessarily staffed by the veterans’ resource center, and so have difficulty identifying and tracking the student veterans on campus. Registration for these courses was purely voluntary, and the instructor utilized multiple methods (e.g., email, flyers, word of mouth) to solicit participation. The class sizes were smaller—less than five students—even when controlled for the student veteran population.

Courses with “advanced experience” have progressively deviated from the original structure of their institution’s first year seminar course including meeting time, teaching methods, and content. The instructors were full-time administrators or staff within the veterans’ resource center and have access to record databases. Students were pre-registered for the course, which serves to increase participation. The class met once or twice per week during the entire first semester to be more accessible to the students as the semester progresses.

Objectives

There is consensus across institutions that the course objectives include: orientation to campus; introduction to other departments and resources on campus; refreshing academic skills; connecting to support staff for veterans; reflecting on personal challenges/identity; explaining VA benefits; connecting to peers; and identifying goals/plans for the future.

For the beginner courses these objectives are accomplished by helping the individuals develop their identity as college students. There is also minimal focus on choosing a major or preparing a resume.

The advanced courses tend to discuss identity development as the transition from the military to the (now civilian) student veteran. There is greater incorporation of vocational discernment, major selection, and personality self-exploration through assessments such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), Skills Finder, or an interest inventory such as the Self-Directed Search.

Assignments

Each course included writing components, some procedural assignments (e.g., attend class, meet with advisor, turn in health forms, submit certification documents), and time management/organization instruction. Interestingly, instructors indicated that time management activities were the most important lessons taught in their course.

In the beginner courses, the instructors included five or less assignments with participation making up a large portion of the total grade. Also, there were no opportunities for extra credit. Therefore, if a student failed one assignment, it could devastate his or her overall grade in the class. This could result in the student feeling doubtful about his or her abilities and begin to question whether or not he or she belongs in college. The more advanced courses had many small assignments (e.g., 10-14), which provided increased opportunities for students to practice time management skills and spread out the total point value for the course.

In addition, the advanced courses included a written reflection on personal identity either as a veteran, civilian, or both. These instructors have learned to avoid complex, overly taxing reading or writing assignments, as the students are in their first semester and may not have completed a college-level English composition course. It is not a good assumption that first-year students will always be motivated to complete complex assignments independently if they are not first provided with instruction (i.e. writing style or citation standards). This reinforces an assessment by the instructor of a student veteran career class at University of South Florida who suggested that the course needs to have “more ‘military bearing’ than ‘collegiate leniency’” (Stein-McCormick et al., 2013, p. 58). The

instructors also found that these first-year student veterans seemed to benefit from an initial explanation of course expectations and more structure in the beginning of the term.

Assessments

Every course included the university-required course evaluation, and based upon the results, changes were implemented for subsequent semesters. All instructors agreed that the most valuable result of the course was that the students are more connected to the veterans' resource center and their peers. This integration translates into being better connected to campus culture and resources, increased communication between the student veterans and the instructor/administrator, and more participation in student veteran group activities.

The instructors for the advanced courses have added another qualitative assessment component for feedback. The instructors facilitated a discussion similar to an "after action report" during the last class where students are encouraged to answer open-ended questions about their review of the class. By the end of the semester, the students are familiar with the instructor and feel comfortable providing honest feedback about the course. Using this approach, the students often come up with unique suggestions for improvements.

In addition, more advanced instructors have begun tracking GPA and/or retention rate differences between students who take the course and those who do not. This data is helpful to demonstrate effectiveness to administrators or students. Furthermore, one advanced course utilized a pre and post assessment of the students' career confidence to evaluate how they progressed in their comfort level as a student preparing for a future career.

Lessons Learned

In addition to analysis above, each instructor was asked to identify any specific "lessons learned" that would be beneficial for other professionals to know. These points do not fall under the other

specific areas, but rather apply to the overall experience of teaching the veteran-specific transition course. They are not presented in any specific order.

1. Tracking GPA/retention rates is crucial to moving towards pre-registration authority with administrators. With limited resources to do these calculations, obtaining the information can be difficult, but worthwhile to the program. One idea is to use work study students to help collect and analyze the aggregate data.
2. There is a definite relationship between student effort (procrastination, attendance) and success (GPA, and retention). Students who are not attending class or frequently turning in assignments late are usually doing poorly in other classes as well, and tend to have a lower GPA. Within the first three weeks, instructors indicated that it usually becomes clear who is likely to struggle and not retain for the following semester.
3. Students do not expect the transition class to be helpful. Initially, they view it as unnecessary because they believe the extra help is not needed. However, after the class is over, the students have overwhelmingly positive evaluations of the course because they often do not realize how different college is from high school or how meaningful it is to bond with their peers during that first semester.
4. When a student is failing the class, an instructor can reach out to the student and make referrals; however, it is usually a symptom of something larger and/or they have complications in other areas of their lives that take precedence over education. In many of these incidences, at least the instructor/administrator has some understanding of what might have been the root cause for the student's challenges in higher education.
5. There is an opinion that the instructor *must* be a veteran in order to develop the necessary rapport with students; however, that is not always the case. It is suggested, though, that if the instructor is not a veteran that they have significant understanding of the military culture,

experience working with veterans, and they should consider using an upper class student veteran as a teaching assistant to bridge the gap.

6. Financial concerns can be a major challenge for student veterans, so make sure to provide information on GI Bill, financial aid, scholarships, etc. The instructor also should be well-versed in the intricacies of the various chapters of education benefits because these questions come up frequently.
7. If an institution is looking to initiate a new course, start with a course that is already available at the institution to make the approval process easier, and then tailor as appropriate. These courses can be modified from existing first-year student models, career education, or other “college 101” listings.
8. With larger populations of student veterans, sometimes more than one section is necessary to accommodate different schedules or different sub groups with unique needs (active duty, special admits, STEM majors, upper class transfers, etc.).

Conclusions

This pilot study was intentionally designed to have a small sample size and a wider scope of questions in order to get a broad picture of what these transition courses look like across the country. Now that some general trends have been identified, there are clear avenues for further investigation, including expanded samples to confirm what has been described here. Future research should narrow down the scope of questions and expand the sample to include a larger number of institutions including community colleges.

Based on these initial findings, future research should focus on the utilization of major/career exploration and how it benefits the student based upon pre/post assessments. Career advising during the first semester is an important part of maximizing educational benefits (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2013). As discussed, the Post 9/11 GI Bill is limited to 36 months, so student

veterans cannot afford to be unsure of their educational goals. If major/career exploration during the first semester helps student veterans feel more confident in their choice of education track, they might also find more motivation and persistence to overcome the challenges faced by non-traditional students.

Another area of focus could be tracking differences in GPA and retention rates between student veterans who take the class and those who do not. This data could be collected from the first to second semesters, and first to second year. The need for this data is a top priority because, anecdotally, instructors know that making student veterans take this class helps them do better in higher education, but administrators resist making it mandatory. If a follow-up study can show a significant difference in academic success between those who take the course and those who do not, perhaps administrators will feel more comfortable in at least pre-registering student veterans for the class.

The findings of this pilot study provide a baseline understanding of how institutions are implementing a transition course for student veterans. As indicated, the advanced experience instructors intentionally designed their course to provide the most comprehensive support for their student veterans arriving on campus. These instructors also go above and beyond the standard course evaluation and ask the students to provide greater qualitative data on which to base future changes to the course. In order to more fully understand the course's impact on overall success, instructors should begin tracking and reporting data on student veterans' career development, retention, and GPA outcomes. Only then will this tool gain more attention and credibility as a comprehensive and holistic approach to supporting student veterans as they acclimate to higher education.

In conclusion, the researchers would like to extend gratitude to the instructors from each institution that participated because your time, effort, and experience made this project possible. We hope that these findings will help you in some way as well as provide guidance to our colleagues.

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