

Proposal to Conduct Classroom Research with Respect to Army Veterans' Learning in an
Environment with Less Structure than the Military.

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Problem Statement

How will Army veterans transitioning from a wartime military to a four-year university learn and function as first-time undergraduate students in an environment that is less structured and where there is not a clearly defined chain of command?

After separating from the Army, I went back to school to complete a Masters in Business Administration (MBA) in International Business. Unlike many soldiers departing the Army, I was fortunate enough to have attended a four-year college prior to entering the military. The knowledge from that experience helped me maneuver around my new campus without becoming terribly frustrated with what I viewed as a lack of direction and instruction. I do not imagine the experience would be the same for the soldier who is stepping onto a university campus for the first time and attempting to pursue his undergraduate degree. Additionally, many soldiers now separating from service must also adjust to civilian life based on the trials of war. The transition for them will involve even more change, and it may be difficult for non-veterans to comprehend the resulting implications.

Because of the Post-9/11 GI Bill recently started, there will be many more Army veterans attending colleges and universities throughout the country in the near future. Army veterans tend to have had unique responsibilities and opportunities by the time they are discharged. These experiences often separate them from traditional students enrolling in colleges or universities for the first time. As a result, educators will need to pay particular attention to not only how this group of individuals is taught, but also to how they learn. Ideally, such a study will be helpful in preventing veterans from becoming frustrated with their schooling and applying those feelings

toward their general opinions of higher education. Using the scholarship of teaching and learning to address the research question and determine how Army veterans are learning will allow colleges and universities, veterans' organizations, and most importantly, veterans themselves to continue building on the findings and expand them to address other areas of the university that may indirectly affect their classroom learning (e.g. applications, admissions, financial aid, and registration processes).

Objectives

In searching for answers to this question, I will measure how long students attend their chosen universities, i.e. whether they only attend for a single semester, several semesters, or all the way through graduation. I will also track the reasons for students' departure or decisions to take time-off, as well as reasons for continuing at the institution. **Army veterans who remain after their first two semesters will qualify as successes**, as they will have survived the novelty of a new situation and demonstrated they have the potential to continue in the new environment and achieve the ultimate goal of obtaining a degree.

Comment [??1]: This seems sensible, but you might want to withhold judgment about what constitutes a success until you've seen actual data. There may be patterns that suggest a different criterion or set of criteria.

Theoretical Grounding

Because of the prominence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, violence and possible triggers for Army veterans is a broader theoretical area that will be considered as part of this project. It is difficult and imprudent to study the learning of Army veterans who very likely may have been to war without having an awareness of the subject.

Comment [??2]: This section feels like it could be further developed. Are there specific theories of collaborative learning and/or trauma studies that connect to your themes of structure and authority?

Learning in cohorts, collaborative and cooperative learning are other theoretical areas of interest for this particular project as many veterans groups are developing on university campuses as a means of transition and those ideas are also now being taken into classroom settings.

Literature Review

(Annotated Bibliography attached)

There is very little scholarship of teaching and learning literature related to this specific question on Army veterans and structure at universities. A great deal of articles related to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder has come about in recent years in response to the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Because of its prominence, literature on possible triggering actions and potential violence in the classroom will be considered. Violence and Gender, one such book by Paula Ruth Gilbert and Kimberly Eby, “enables readers to learn about these complex issues so they can work to lessen the occurrence of violence in their personal and professional lives.”

(amazon.com)

There is also literature available regarding veterans’ services and offices being developed or established in response to the newest GI Bill. However, the majority of the literature is more traditionally-based research that focuses little on the few people who are exceptions to the rules or on their learning habits and abilities. There are scholarship of teaching and learning materials available that are more indirectly-related. One example is a course portfolio on Pennsylvania State University’s (PSU) Narrative, Oral History, and New Media Technologies course that produced *Back from Iraq: The Veterans’ Stories Project* in Spring 2009. It was a one-time only (as of yet) filmmaking course veterans-only course at PSU where veterans from the various services created and produced their own films. I will contact the teachers involved with the course to find out if they have any insights on the interactions they witnessed in classes or if they have additional footage the students might be willing to allow be used to gain insight into how they learned.

Comment [??3]: Given your focus on retention, you might want to look at the substantial literature of retention in general, and retention of adult students more specifically. While there may be little or nothing specifically about veterans or active military, there may be some ideas, metrics, strategies, etc., that could be transferrable.

Comment [??4]: This book, as I understand it from conversations with Kim and Paula, is more a textbook/reader for courses that help students process their own experiences with violence than it is a scholarly examination of the experience of violence. That being said, it would be very interesting to look at the effectiveness of courses like Violence and Gender, which deal with violence generally and sexual and domestic violence more specifically, in addressing the needs of veterans who have experienced trauma. It would be worth writing to Kim Eby to see if they’ve had veterans in the course. (My sense is most students are the typical 18-21 year olds.)

Comment [??5]: Sounds like a fascinating course!

Other scholarship of teaching and learning portals will be reviewed for new information pertaining to the research throughout the project. As mentioned previously, cohort, collaborative, and cooperative learning are other theoretical areas of interest for this particular project as many veterans groups are developing on university campuses as a means of transition and those ideas are also now being taken into classroom settings. One example is the Supportive Education for Every Returning Veteran or SERV program at Cleveland State University Veterans there are given the option take their basic courses together for a year before venturing out to courses containing non-veteran students. The course director, John Schupp, is another potential source for existing information and insight.

Methodology

A qualitative study will be used to complete this research. To do this, I will ask the Office of Military Services and the Admissions Office for help obtaining access to participants for this study. I will also request six trained interviewers/observers be brought on to form a team.

Before the start of the school year, we will identify a specified number of Army veterans and contact them via email, telephone, and/or letter about the research. Those contacted will receive an invitation to a social gathering hosted by the Office of Military Services where the appropriate consent forms will be distributed for signature to those who wish to participate. On the consent forms, the veterans will be notified again (having also been informed during the initial contact) that they will be interviewed at the start and end of each semester regarding their views on their own learning and their expectations/results in the classrooms, specifically with respect to structure and authority. Additionally, we will notify the veterans that observational research will be conducted regularly in their classrooms throughout each semester, though not necessarily every class session or by the same individual. Finally, we will create a blog tied to

Comment [??6]: Are you proposing that these offices pay for this? If so, you'll need to make sure that they can see what they will gain from the results of your research. My guess is you'll need to think about how to scale the project based on a variable number of researchers, as funding allows.

the Office of Military Services where we would request participants fill out an adaptation of the “2-minute paper” Classroom Assessment Technique once each month (e.g. what are the most important things you have learned since the start of the semester?...since last month? What questions are still unanswered?). The veterans will be able to post anonymously if they choose, so that the comments can be available for all to view and respond to. The participants will also be able to use the blog to record their thoughts on their learning as the semester progresses as often as they see fit and for possible use in their post semester interviews. The following fall, another social gathering will be held to formally unveil research results to the participants and on the blog site.

The qualitative study over two semesters will allow me to perform content analysis on the blog entries for recurring themes that may be the starting point for future SoTL projects and in conjunction with the interviews, will allow for dialogue between the researchers and participants, as well as among the participants.

I selected these methods in order to have an opening welcoming environment with a communal feel. In the literature regarding veterans entering higher education institutions, it appears that fewer begin at four-year universities, than at community colleges or four-year colleges. Therefore, there are probably fewer veterans at larger universities. Although that is likely not the case at Mason, this method will build a model that is transferable and applicable to other universities by allowing the Army veterans an opportunity to meet each other and the chance to belong to a community within the larger university setting.

Dissemination

As mentioned within the methodology, the first means of disseminating the results of this research project will be at the unveiling to the participants at a social gathering at the start of the

Comment [??7]: This is an intriguing idea that would likely lead to some very interesting data. However, you'll need to account for the fact that this is both an educational intervention as well as a data gathering mechanism. In other words, how will you isolate the effect of doing this regular writing from the other educational experiences the participants have over the course of the year?

Comment [??8]: Are there ways in which these prompts can be tailored to focus attention of the specific issues of structure and authority on which you initially propose to focus?

fall semester following the completion of the study and on the blog created and linked to the Office of Military Services. The primary intended audiences for the results of this work are the Army veterans who will be starting their degrees at four-year universities and the faculty who will be teaching them. I will ask if any of the participants would be interested in developing/updating a website to be used for our blog and eventual results presentation. Once completed and shared with the participants, I will submit the research portfolio to the Multimedia Educational Resource for Online Teaching (MERLOT).

My secondary intended audiences are the veterans' services offices on four-year university campuses in the region (VA). To that aspect, I will arrange a virtual conference of the offices to share results and exchange information.

Finally, I will seek permission to distribute an executive summary of the results with the site address at the Welcome Home to Washington: Fostering Higher Education Success for Veterans & Their Families Symposium at The George Washington University or perhaps as one of its pre-registration resources.

Timeline

The timeline intended for this project is a period of 15 months (Jul 20XX- Sep 20XX + 1). I will also request six trained interviewers/observers be brought on to form a team. They will be put into pairs and each pair will be responsible for twelve veterans (36 overall); each person will observe three of their veterans per week. Each of the observers will also be responsible for monitoring the blog for a given period of time during the year.

I intend to have the researchers onboard in Jul and student contact made by the third week of that month. I will host the kick-off social gathering no later than three weeks before the start of classes. The blog/website will be operational one week before classes begin, and email

notifications sent. The team will schedule and conduct end of the old semester and start of the new semester interviews no later than the end of the first week of classes of the spring semester. Final interviews will be conducted no later than two weeks after the last final exam day. We will complete the research analysis, consolidate the results, and finalize the dissemination plans no later than the first day of classes. The social gathering to unveil the results will be no later than the third week of class.

Budget

For this research, I will request six trained interviewers/observers for a period of 15 months (Jul 20XX- Sep 20XX + 1). Funds for travel in and around the Washington DC Metro area are required to attend the Welcome Home to Washington: Fostering Higher Education Success for Veterans & Their Families Symposium at The George Washington University. In addition, I will request a portion of funds to support use of office space at Mason and funds to purchase refreshments for the kick-off and closing social gatherings.

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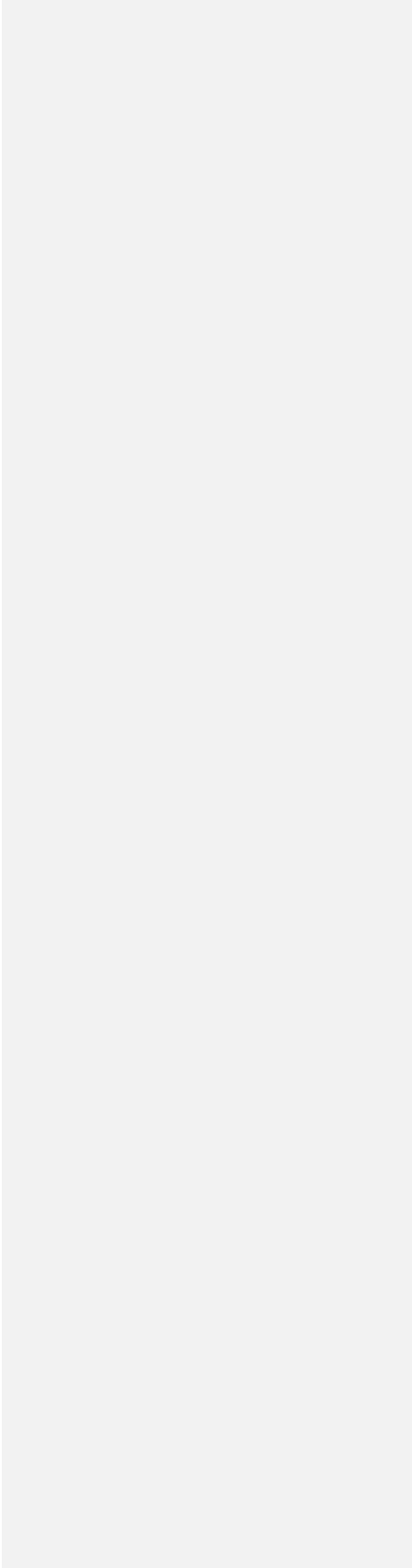
This is a great start to developing a project in an area much in need of research. The research design seems sound and realistically implementable if you're successful in finding funding, and the issue of retention is a wise one on which to focus, given many likely funders' interest in it as a metric.

In order to be successful in securing funding and demonstrating the scholarly quality of your project, I'd suggest two areas of focus as you continue to develop the project. First, you need to zero in on to whom you're going to appeal for funding and make clear to them the payoff of investing in your project, which will mean being more specific about costs and estimating the potential impact on retention. Second, you need to make a clearer connection between what you expect to learn from your inquiry and the existing literature in the areas to which you point. What gaps in existing knowledge will you fill? How will you build on what's known already?

If you decide to actually put this plan into action, please let me know how it goes. I'd be pleased to be of help in any way I can as you do so.

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Annotated Bibliography

Barr, M. (2009, September 23). Teacher's vets: concerned by former troops' unease in the classroom, chemistry instructor sets out to make the transition easier. *Stars and Stripes*, 3-4.

This article discusses the Supportive Education for the Returning Veteran (SERV) Program and its beginnings. John C. Schupp, a chemistry professor at Cleveland State University, started doing an experiment with his students who were military veterans after witnessing some distressing behaviors from them in his classroom. As a result, he learned there are issues that many veterans may have with respect to being in crowded classrooms, not knowing how to navigate the university administration, and overall study habits.

Beach, R. (2008). Economics course focuses on vets' needs. *McClatchy-Tribune Business News*, Retrieved from <http://mutex.gmu.edu:2048/login?url=http://proquest.umi.com/mutex.gmu.edu/pqdweb?did=1619842211&Fmt=3&clientID=31810&RQT=309&VName=PQD> doi: 1619842211

This article demonstrates how a professor at Southern Connecticut University tailored her macroeconomics curriculum by using military-related examples in her course. It will be open to active duty servicemembers, their families, and other individuals that will encounter military members on a regular basis. Her intention is to make the Veterans' Affairs Office resources, such as access to tutoring and senior faculty, available to those who may be deploying on a regular basis.

Carey, K. (2010). Despite years of credits, still no degree. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/mutex.gmu.edu/article/Despite-Years-of-Credits-S/65026/>

Although this article is not veteran-specific, it highlights well an issue that many veterans face when attempting to return to or begin their higher education careers – how to receive credit for prior classes and previous work experience. It details a student's fight to have courses for a two-year degree applied to her four-year degree. It also illustrates her frustrations of trying to meet with the determining officials via email and on her lunch breaks but with little success. Upon finally meeting with an administrator, justifications and transcripts in hand, he does not take any time to review her documents. Additionally, he lets her know her work is being rejected because of a state policy which she later discovers is really not the case. Servicemembers whose jobs often involve equipment or technology not yet used in the civilian world may experience the frustration demonstrated by the examples in this article.

Gilbert, P., & Eby, K. (2003). *Violence and gender: An interdisciplinary reader*. Prentice Hall.

“Using different disciplinary approaches, this collection of thoughtful and timely selections focuses on integrating issues related to violence and gender. Violence and Gender enables readers to learn about these complex issues so they can work to lessen the occurrence of violence in their personal and professional lives. The introductory section presents a number of theories of

violence that ground readers in different theories and reasons for violent behavior. The subsequent sections deal with the topics of gender, youth violence, domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse, violence and sports, and media representation of violence.” (Description taken from www.amazon.com) Because of the prominence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, literature on possible triggering actions and potential violence in the classroom will be considered.

Farrell, E. (2005). GI blues. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 51(36), Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com.mutex.gmu.edu/article/GI-Blues/5396/>

In this article, the Montgomery GI Bill of 1984 (Chapter 31) is described as being insufficient to cover most of the expenses a veteran encounters upon attending a college or university. A portion particularly emphasizes the nontraditional element that veterans face due to having families to support while in school. They require more time and finances than the GI Bill affords them. This article contrasts with many of the more recent pieces that address the Post-9/11 (Chapter 33) GI Bill instituted in Fall 2009.

McNealey, T. (2004). *Veteran's college choices: a process of stratification and social reproduction*. Unpublished manuscript, Graduate College, The University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona.

This student's dissertation included research on factors that influenced a particular group of veterans' choices to attend or not attend school using their GI Bill benefits. Preparing for a new career, making more money, using a benefit they have earned, and obtaining an official credential are reasons the author focused on with respect to students who chose to attend. Lack of interest in higher education, self-confidence issues, and perceived inadequate funding were the factors she addressed with respect to those who did not choose to use their GI Bill benefits. This paper is helpful for finding out what motivates some students to attend a college or university. Though they may seem similar to reasons of traditional students, the detail provided in the dissertation adds additional context specific to veterans' situations.

McKinney, K. (2007). *Enhancing learning through the scholarship of teaching and learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

In this text, Kathleen McKinney walks her readers through the basic steps of conducting a scholarship of teaching and learning research project. She covers the history of the topic, discusses how to define the research question, and addresses specific issues pertaining to the question. Additionally, she provides examples specific to each of her points in her own field of psychology and adds examples of how the practice can be implemented in other disciplines.

Muchmore, S. (2008 October 6). From War room to classrooms: colleges help veterans understand and take advantage of educational benefits. *Tulsa World*, Retrieved from http://www.tulsaworld.com/news/article.aspx?subjectid=11&articleid=20081006_11_A1_SgtCas327847&archive=yes

This article makes a valid point of mentioning that not only will there be an influx of new veterans in the classrooms, but there will also be many new staff members brought onto campuses to support those veterans. It also brings to light that there are many National Guard members and reservists who are returning from deployments, as well as regular active duty servicemembers. In the article, members of the Tulsa Community College (TCC) and Oklahoma University (OU) community discuss their attendance at either school. One student addresses what it is like for him in the classroom, while another student describes how she does not feel any of her classmates need to know she served in the military. Additionally, it presents comments from the staff members who are supporting the veterans in their transitions back to civilian life at each of these institutions.

Tobey, N. (Designer). (2009). *Back from iraq: the veterans' stories project*. [Web]. Retrieved from <http://wpsu.org/backfromiraq/index>

This website contains content from a one-time only (as of yet) filmmaking veterans-only course at Pennsylvania State University where veterans from the various services created and produced their own films. The teachers involved with the course may be able to offer insights on the interactions they witnessed in classes, or if they have additional footage, see whether the students might be willing to allow the footage be used to gain insight into how they learned in the course.

Zinger, L., & Cohen, A. (2010). Veterans returning from war into the classroom: How can colleges be better prepared to meet their needs. *Contemporary Issues in Education Research*, 3(1), 39-51.

This article focuses on veterans going to Queensborough Community College after having been deployed as servicemembers to either Iraq or Afghanistan in a time of war. The article covered several aspects of transitioning back to civilian life - Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), substance abuse, and "reverse cultural shock" to name a few.