

# Student Veterans in Higher Education: Transitions and Teaching

Annotated Bibliography for 2016 NEH Summer Institute on Veterans in Society

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Atwood, Paul. "Teaching About War in a Time of War." *The Radical Teacher* 72 (Spring 2005): 31-36.

In this provocative piece, Atwood, an American Studies professor and a member of Veterans for Peace, shares his informal findings that suggest few college students are "reading on their own about [the Iraq and Afghanistan] wars with any depth, or seeking out detailed reportage or analysis" and concludes that the "responsibilities falling to teachers attempting to teach about war in this time of war are therefore exceedingly vital" (31). For those considering taking on that "responsibility" in their own teaching, Atwood offers as an example his approach to a class titled "War in American Culture," in which he presents examples of Idealist, Dissenter, and Jingoist responses to war for students to examine and discuss. He also recommends some alternative texts regarding war that can be considered alongside more commonly assigned texts as well as texts that can be used to compare events and decisions made in past wars with those occurring in the current wars.

Coll, José. "Psychological Invisibility: Veterans in Higher Education (Part I)." *The Evollution*. Last modified April 12, 2013. <http://evollution.com/opinions/psychological-invisibility-veterans-higher-education-part-1/>

Coll, José. "Psychological Invisibility: Veterans in Higher Education (Part II)." *The Evollution*. Last modified April 19, 2013. <http://evollution.com/opinions/psychological-invisibility-veterans-higher-education-part-2/>

These two short web posts by former Marine and professor of Social Work José Coll identify and attempt to overturn four persistent myths regarding student veterans as well as minimize stigmatization resulting from the persistence of these myths. Of particular note is Coll's emphasis on the danger of "psychological invisibility," which he defines as "a syndrome created by the perception of an individual who may feel depersonalized and overshadowed by stereotypical assumptions and prejudices."

These brief posts can easily be shared with colleagues to introduce them to the concept of "psychological invisibility" and its effects as it applies to student veterans and to open conversations about how faculty, administrators, and staff can coordinate efforts to try to improve the success of student veterans at their institutions.

DiRamio, David, Robert Ackerman, and Regina L. Garza Mitchell. "From Combat to Campus: Voices of Student-veterans." *NASPA Journal* 45, no. 1 (2008): 73-102.

Based upon interviews with 25 student veterans (6 women and 19 men from 3 geographically diverse research institutions) who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, this article calls for "a comprehensive and holistic system for assisting veterans" (92) on college campuses—from financial aid and student affairs to faculty and academic advisors.

As one of the earliest published studies of Post-9/11 student veterans, the richness of this article comes from the student veterans' own voices, as they attempt to overturn misconceptions about service members as students. In their own voices, the interviewees exhibit traits such as maturity and an "understanding of cultural differences and empathy for the worldviews of others" (84). In poignant statements, these student veterans also articulate their difficulties with balancing work and college, overcoming a perceived lack of academic preparation, and struggling with "irritation and impatience with their less mature civilian peers" (87).

The article provides a useful summary and overview of potential roadblocks to a veteran's transition to campus for those readers just considering these questions and offers potential strategies to improve transitions processes for both combat and non-combat veterans entering institutions of higher education.

Gann, Sarah M. "‘There is a lot of self-reliance’: Modern Military Veterans and the Challenge of Effective Transition from Soldier to Student." *The Journal of Military Experience* 2, no. 1 (2012): 211-228.

Similar to other authors examining student veterans' transitions from a military context to a classroom context, Gann identifies some obstacles to student veterans' success in higher education (their lack of connection with their peers, faculty preconceptions about their academic abilities, their self-reliance and seclusion) and calls for recognition of student veterans' assets. Gann describes student veterans as "inherently different from other students" (215) and assert that "[v]eterans who sense that academia regards them as broken, willfully nonconformist, or unworkable in the college environment will react with understandable frustration, which puts them at risk for attrition" (213). Whereas other authors focus on collaborative efforts to support student veterans' transitions, Gann focuses primarily on what faculty can do to support student veterans' academic success—by taking the time to understand how to engage veterans as learners—as well as their social acceptance among non-veteran students in a class. According to Gann, "the individual professor, not peers" (223) has the most impact in the manner in which he or she facilitates or impedes a student veteran's sense of social acceptance within the classroom.

Hart, Alexis and Roger Thompson. "War, Trauma, and the Writing Classroom: A Response to Travis Martin's 'Combat in the Classroom.'" *Writing on the Edge* 23, no. 2 (2013): 37-47.

Hart and Thompson reflect on the prevalence of the personal essay as a standard assignment in first-year college writing courses and discuss the complex decisions student veterans make about disclosing their status to instructors and/or classmates through the vehicle of the personal essay. While Martin deliberately assigned personal essays to the veterans in his course in order to induce a process of healing through writing, Thompson and Hart sound a note of caution about the potential "costs" (42) that may accompany the rewards of engaging with students in composing stories of service—especially those in which student veterans are grappling with intense trauma—and question whether classrooms are an appropriate place to open space for student veterans to voice their war traumas.

Martin's focus on war trauma and male combat veterans, prompts another cautionary note in Hart and Thompson's essay, as the authors consider whether or not "stereotypes about warrior writers and 'true war stories' may block [faculty] from seeing [other types of] veterans or prevent us from opening spaces to grapple with all the complexities of war and veteran experiences" (45). These questions about how to design pedagogies that provide space for students (especially undergraduates) to grapple with the complexities of war and veteran experience are at the core of the emerging field of Veterans Studies.

Livingston, Wade G., Pamela A. Havice, Tony W. Cawthon, and David S. Fleming. "Coming Home: Student Veterans' Articulation of College Re-enrollment." *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice* 48, no. 3 (2011): 315-331.

The authors interviewed 15 student veterans attending the same research institution who had re-enrolled, i.e., who had "initiated their college careers and had their matriculation interrupted by deployment (combat or non-combat in nature), training, or self-induced military absence, and then... re-enrolled in college" (319). The authors conclude that for re-enrolling student veterans, the *social* transition from a military culture to a campus culture may be more difficult than the academic transition. Of note is the student veterans' reported overreliance on self-support and their subsequent limited use of academic support or student services, which, along with the student veterans' limited disclosure of their veteran status, led to their virtual invisibility on their campus. When the student veterans did seek support, they tended to rely on other student veterans or faculty with prior military experience. The authors offer ideas for how campus professionals might better identify and thus better support student veterans at their institutions.

The article includes a literature review of post-World War II publications focused on student veterans'

experiences, and points to “the distinct paucity of literature” on the topic, resulting in a “literature gap” (317) until the early 2000s. Filling in that gap may be a rich area for researchers entering the field of Veterans Studies.

This article was also the subject of a research brief from the Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF). The IVMF Research Brief offers implications for practice, policy, and future research, and points to some of the article’s shortcomings, including the homogeneity of the interviewees (White, male) and the small sampling size.

Martin, Travis. “Combat in the Classroom. A Writing and Healing Approach to Teaching Student Veterans.” *Writing on the Edge* 22, no. 2 (2012): 27-35.

Martin founded the first Veterans Studies program at Eastern Kentucky University. The program has been covered in numerous national publications, including the *New York Times*, and focuses on the intersection of the humanities, the arts, and the study of war. This article discusses how he discovered that when, as an undergraduate student veteran himself, he was “given the opportunity to apply [his military] knowledge to the classroom, [his] past, [his] experiences, even [his] pain became sources of great strength” (28) in his academic work. He then outlines how he applied this insight as an instructor by using the techniques of “bibliotherapy—writing and reading as healing” (27) to help other veterans make the transition from servicemember to student.

Martin’s account is about one veteran leading a class made up of other veterans. As he makes clear, he has the ability to shift his persona from “Professor Martin” to “Sergeant Martin” to forward his pedagogical approach, a transformation not available to civilian instructors or perhaps even to non-combatant veteran instructors.