10 Things to Know About Student Veterans

By: Alison Lighthall

10. Student veterans are a highly diverse group—as diverse as America itself.

There are no generalizations that are remotely accurate about this group, other than their common hope that more education will make their lives and their families’ lives better. Returning military personnel come from all over, and are a rainbow of colors, shapes, religions, sexual orientation, and political views. It will benefit everyone if you open yourself to the enriching experience of listening closely to what they reveal about themselves and their lives.

9. Veterans do not see themselves as victims. Ever.

Victims are people who feel no control over their lives and perceive themselves as being at the mercy of others. Even when student veterans are psychologically struggling or physically wounded, they see themselves as powerful warriors. This is part of the reason it’s difficult for them to seek appropriate accommodations in the classroom. How can they acknowledge the challenge in their functioning as a disability and still maintain their identity as a strong soldier living by the Warrior Ethos? Framing these accommodations as “adaptations” that many people need, not just veterans, helps this internal struggle. And, once they can accept the adjustments, academic life often gets significantly easier.

8. They can feel very alone on campus.

When a service member is discharged from the military, it’s aptly termed “separation” and it comes with all the heartbreak and disorientation that being torn from one’s tribe brings. They just spent the last several years inextricably tied to some type of social system, whether it was a brigade, battalion, company, platoon, squad, team, or just one on one with a battle buddy. During those years, solitude was rare. Now, suddenly they’re no longer attached to those systems, and the feeling of vulnerability can be terrifying.

The loss of friendships, purpose, identity, structure, and income is enough to push most people to their limits. Throw in an unfamiliar social system that bears no resemblance to the military, has no clear chain of command, and is filled with many students and faculty who can’t even imagine the student veterans’ experiences, and you have a deeply alienating environment for many of them.

Typically, student veterans are also older and more experienced than their freshman peers, which helps them keep things in perspective and not sweat the small stuff. They can, and do, manage huge amounts of pain, both physical and mental, without complaint. But consequently, they also bristle at trivial matters called “crises” by others, and scorn the frequent self-absorption of their peers. Often they see most civilian students as not emotionally strong enough to be their friends, and so the student veterans usually isolate themselves in school.

Connecting student veterans can effectively ease this isolation, and it’s especially helpful if connections can be made between new veterans and those who have successfully navigated a semester or two. Incoming student veterans need role modeling and guidance. They need to be reassured that, yes, school is a very different kind of battlefield and it requires an entirely different skill set and mental map. They need to hear, “I’ve made it work and you can too.” From a shared sense of alienation, they bond together, and that bonding then mitigates their alienation.

7. They are often unaware of their own mild traumatic brain injuries.

Almost every Marine I’ve ever known, and most of the front-line soldiers I’ve ever talked to, have experienced a significant explosion. But if it wasn’t their truck that blew up or their limb lost, they often don’t see it as their experience.

When a bomb detonates, its concussive impact on nearby soldiers is massive. If it weren’t for the brain’s remarkable plasticity and the indomitable human spirit, these men and women would be mostly incapable of learning, much less taking on a college education. Difficulties with memory, attention and concentration, as well as mental processing, abstract reasoning, and executive functioning, are common problems for student veterans.

But there are ways to assist your student veterans, and some of the most common strategies will not only assist them, but all of the students in your classroom. For example, make and share recordings of your classroom lectures and discussions, and allow note taking on laptops so that students can review and process the class-room material in a less sensory-stimulating environment. Wear a microphone to enhance auditory clarity, and make sure that class videos are captioned. Also try to use texts that can be obtained electronically, in case the student needs the text to be read aloud. Posting your notes ahead of time will help the student veteran better prepare, and allowing students to use a ruler during exams will help them keep their place. If they’re highly anxious during exams, it may be helpful to give them a different time and place. Make yourself available for out-of-class office hours.

6. There are three things you should never say to a student veteran (but they still hear them every day).

“These wars were atrocities and a waste of human life,” “I don’t get why you’re having so much trouble—you volunteered, right?” and worst of all, “Did you kill anyone?” These comments do more than upset veterans; they wound the hearts...
of men and women who are already overburdened with sorrow. For this reason, I believe faculty’s opinions about the military or recent wars are best kept out of the classroom. You may not always be able to prevent a student from saying something hurtful, but you can model awareness of other viewpoints, and explain how these comments might be hurtful.

5. **Female veterans suffer deeply, and almost always in silence.**

While women make up about 15 percent of today’s military, it’s still very much a man’s domain—something female service personnel were acutely aware of every day we were in uniform. Women had to do it better, faster, and smarter than the guys to earn their respect. And we had to have a better sense of humor and a stronger sense of self to survive their constant covert, and sometimes overt, tests of our emotional and physical strength and trustworthiness.

But more insidious, and infinitely more damaging, is the persistent sexual harassment and sexual assault of female soldiers. The Veteran Administration estimates that at least 22 percent of females are sexually assaulted during their time in service. It’s important to understand that when a female service member experiences a sexual assault from a comrade, she experiences it as incest. After all, this is her military family, and these men are her brothers in arms. This physical and psychological breach causes immense damage to the assaulted soldier, who often feels she must keep it a secret to maintain her own safety and “family” unity. Only when she gets home can she begin the long process of fully untangling this very complex experience and all the emotions that go with it. Be aware of these potential issues, and follow your school’s guidelines for referral if it comes up with a student veteran in your classroom.

4. **They often want to go back to the war zone.**

Combat veterans often miss the intense closeness they had with their comrades, and being in an environment where everyone understands them, where they’re doing a job they’re trained for and competent at, where everything they do matters. As the saying goes, “War may be hell, but home ain’t exactly heaven either.” Often, returning veterans feel guilty about surviving when their comrades, and being in an environment where everyone understands them, where they’re doing a job they’re trained for and competent at, where everything they do matters. As the saying goes, “War may be hell, but home ain’t exactly heaven either.” Often, returning veterans feel guilty about surviving when friends have not. Often, they want to go back, regain that closeness, and “make things right.”

Deploying downrange, or going outside the green zone and into the raw world of unpredictable violence, even once, is a huge experience. Doing it over and again adds up to a set of experiences that has no civilian equal. It is not “like” anything else. It’s terrifying and thrilling, heartbreaking and empowering, destructive and constructive, all at once, and it is intense all the time. When veterans get home, not only do they feel alone and that their lives suddenly have less meaning, they also feel bored. Facing death every day made them feel completely alive, but being bored makes them feel dead. It takes quite a while to throttle down and adapt to the lower level of adrenaline that civilian life calls for. That’s part of the reason so many discharged soldiers go into law enforcement or engage in extreme sports. They’re trying to experience that same adrenaline rush that made them feel so alive before.

So if they write an essay about how much they enjoyed being deployed or how they wish they could go back, take it in stride and respect the process they’re going through. I’ve had aging Vietnam veterans tell me that if they could deploy to Afghanistan today and “help these young soldiers,” they’d go in a heartbeat. Once a warrior, always a warrior.

3. **Combat trauma is an injury, not a mental illness.**

Witnessing your best friend get blown apart by an improvised explosive devise (IED) is a massive shock to the amygdala, the brain’s emotional command center. And the emotional shock is just one component to the injury. The subsequent events and bursts of emotions that swiftly follow an attack of that magnitude will flood the brain with chemicals and commands that leave behind physical imprints that can cause long-term physical, psychological, and emotional distortions.

Healing often can’t begin until the service member is no longer receiving signals of danger and the brain’s chemistry begins to normalize. Sometimes, it takes months, other times, years. But adaptation and recovery are well within the human capacity, and that fact that should be reinforced to the student veteran at every opportunity. For every label they are saddled with (“You have PTSD,” “You are disabled,” etc.), we should counter with what traumatic brain injury expert Dr. (and Colonel) Heidi Terrio calls, “the expectation of recovery.” It is that expectation of recovery that provides hope. And hope is the antidote to giving up on life.

2. To succeed, veterans need your understanding, compassion and respect.

Because the vast majority of Americans choose not to join one of the branches of the military, our student veterans are surrounded by people who have no experience, or context, for understanding their experiences. To many of them, the student veteran’s behavior may be confusing, inexplicable, or even frightening.

Because of anxiety or injury-related disorganization, they may show up late or even miss a class. Or they may come 15 minutes early so they can find the perfect desk that allows them a full view of the room, reducing their sense of physical threat. During class, they may have difficulty sitting still or staying focused, and they may need to leave the room to compose themselves. After class, still struggling to process the taught information and skills, they may be silent or stoic when they need to be reaching out for guidance and support. Regardless of how it looks, what you’re seeing is almost never meant to be disrespectful to you. Your student veterans value and honor authority figures; being deliberately disrespectful would go against their military training and experience. Understanding that their actions are not personal, reaching out to them with compassion and respect, accommodating their individual learning needs, and most importantly, seeing them as people who chose to serve our country and who have endured burdens beyond any thing we can imagine, could make all the difference to that student veteran. It might even mean the difference between him or her finding success in life, or getting lost, jobless, and homeless.

1. **Student veterans are one of America’s greatest untapped human resources.**

They are emotionally mature, goal-oriented, mission-driven, experienced leaders. They work tirelessly to achieve their objectives and look for ways to make meaningful contributions. They are self-sufficient; they will only ask questions when they cannot find the answers themselves. They not only understand the concept of sacrifice for the greater good, they’ve lived it. They are respectful and protective of those around them. They think globally and bypass most things trivial or trendy.