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## Student Veterans in the College Composition Classroom: Realizing Their Strengths and Assessing Their Needs

*Conference on College Composition and Communication  
March 2015, references and further reading updated November 2022*

In 1999, the NCTE resolved to “[a]ffirm, seek, and encourage all teachers to include a diversity of perspectives, cultures, aesthetic responses, and experiences in the teaching and learning of English language arts.” Yet, as Daniel Byman, Senior Fellow for Foreign Policy at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy, observes, “many professors harbor stereotypes about the military, not recognizing the diversity of opinion within military circles on many issues and the remarkable minds of many young [military service members].” In order to reflect the spirit of the NCTE resolution, this document asserts that “learning about the military, war and combat, and service members’ experiences [can actually] complement a campus’s broader commitment to diversity and social understanding” (Rumann 31).

This document first identifies multiple assets student veterans often bring to writing classrooms and then acknowledges some of the special considerations that writing instructors and WPAs should take into account when working with student veterans. After presenting these generalizations, the document offers classroom instructors and WPAs some more detailed answers to the question, “What do I need to know about working with student veterans?” A list of references and further reading, organized roughly by field of study—from composition and writing studies to disability studies and student services—is provided at the end of the document. This organizational structure is meant to present a deliberate move away from deficit-model thinking about military veterans—that veterans are damaged or unprepared or otherwise problematic—to representing military service members as considerable assets and sources of strength, vision, and leadership for our universities, colleges, and our society at large.

### Student Veterans’ Assets

- Student veterans are experienced writers and communicators who are familiar with military genres of writing and questions of authorship sometimes different from but related to those encountered in higher education. That expertise and familiarity should be acknowledged, explored, and built upon.<sup>1</sup>
- Student veterans have served as part of a team and have often served in leadership roles for which problem-solving and thinking on one’s feet were daily requirements. This experience should be valued, honored, and recognized. For example, instructors might invite student veterans to take leadership roles in the classroom, as small group facilitators, or as mentors to other students.
- Many student veterans have spent considerable time overseas and/or working with diverse populations and therefore can contribute meaningful insights they have garnered from these experiences to classroom discussions. As Corey B. Rumann and Florence A. Hamrick explain, “learning about the military, war and combat, and service members’ experiences [can actually] complement a campus’s broader commitment to diversity and social understanding” (31).

- While student veterans may not choose to write about their military experiences for classroom assignments (see Leonhardy), providing venues for student veteran publications and creative work (essays, narratives, creative writing, video making, art work) and sponsoring on-campus events related to military and veterans topics can create opportunities for student veterans to portray the complexities of veterans' individual as well as collective experiences. Veterans' writing groups and programs are growing across the country (see Schell), and faculty members can help establish and/or facilitate such groups on their campuses, collaborate with local community groups, or encourage students to take part in already existing programs (e.g., Words After War, Military Experience and the Arts, The Veterans Writing Project).

### Student Veterans: Special Considerations

- While student veterans have access to benefits that help them pay tuition and other expenses, difficulties processing or receiving benefits can result in retention risks and distraction from academic work.
- Veterans can sometimes feel alienated by campus and classroom cultures (in terms of age, politics, and experience) and thereby also be at risk in terms of retention.
- "Veterans 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." (Gann)
- Some student veterans may have service-related disabilities: "Surveys with student veterans and student service members on their experiences using the Post 9/11 GI Bill, found that most of these survey and focus group participants encountered substantial transition challenges while adapting to life on campus. Among these students, one of the most frequently discussed challenges was coping with service-related disabilities and PTSD....Participants cited such difficulties as being unable to move quickly from one class to the next across campus, hyper-alertness and anxiety caused by PTSD, difficulty concentrating due to TBI, and difficulty relating to other students." (<http://www.woundedwarriorproject.org/programs/policy-government-affairs/key-policy-priorities/objective-2-economic-empowerment/initiative-2.aspx>)
- Student veterans may be reluctant to seek assistance—whether through disability services, counseling, or the Writing Center.
- Student veterans, like other adult students, are more likely to have family and work obligations in addition to their academic workload.
- Student veterans may have to miss classes for VA appointments or may be recalled to active duty, necessitating flexibility in attendance policies.
- Instructors should consider including a syllabus statement indicating their awareness of the complexities of being a student veteran, such as this example created by Katt Blackwell-Starnes: "I recognize the complexities of being a student veteran. If you are a student veteran, please inform me if you need special accommodations. Drill schedules, calls to active duty, complications with GI Bill disbursement, and other unforeseen military and veteran-related developments can complicate your academic life. If you make me aware of a complication, I will do everything I can to assist you or put you in contact with university staff who are trained to assist you." (Hart and Thompson, "An Ethical Obligation")

### FAQs

#### I'm a classroom composition instructor. What do I need to know about veterans?

- Veterans are a diverse population in terms of race, gender, sexuality, class, and ability. Many student veterans, like other adult students, have job and family responsibilities.
- Veterans will often be older and somewhat more mature than conventional college students. They are often disciplined students who exhibit a keen sense of purpose (mission accomplishment) and a strong work ethic.

- Veterans are accustomed to following orders, and therefore they will often value structure and clear, straightforward instructions for writing tasks. They may be unfamiliar with process models of writing and academic documentation styles. They will likely seek explicit standards of assessment.
- Because concerns about the chain of command are important to veterans, they tend to regard their professors as authority figures and may therefore be uncomfortable with informal classroom atmospheres or a perceived lack of structure within a classroom setting.
- Veterans often draw on a range of experiences broader than those associated with typical college-age students, and they often wish to have those experiences valued and respected.
- Veterans also value their privacy, so professors and classmates should not demand that veterans disclose the particulars of their experiences, nor should student veterans be expected to function as stand-in military spokespeople. Veterans may also sometimes be uncomfortable with explicitly or overtly politicized course content.

**I'm a writing program or writing center administrator. What do I need to know about veterans?**

- WPAs should familiarize themselves with the veteran resources on campus; should make faculty, graduate students, and staff in the writing program aware of the resources available to student veterans; and should encourage instructors to inform student veterans of these resources.
- WPAs should offer training to writing instructors to facilitate a better understanding of military culture, the assets that student veterans bring to writing classrooms, and the challenges that veterans may face. Such training could raise awareness of available resources for veterans on campus (see above) and in the local community.<sup>2</sup>
- Writing Center directors should consider offering writing consultations in the campus veteran center (if one is available) and should try to ensure that consultations are offered when student veterans are on campus, as many student veterans are likely to be commuter students who have job and family responsibilities off campus. Writing Center directors may want to consider offering online consultations, as well.
- Writing programs should have plans in place to accommodate veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) concerns and with Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) concerns), as both of these sometimes manifest in a need for additional time for reading and writing as well as difficulties concentrating and short-term memory loss. In addition, syllabi should be made available to veterans in advance of registration, when possible, and instructors should consider offering alternative assignments and readings if triggering material is part of their existing course.

<sup>1</sup> "Student veterans who were able to identify and then translate previous learning and rhetorical experiences from the military into academic writing contexts reported positive perceptions about that writing." (Hinton)

<sup>2</sup> It may be possible and even desirable to coordinate this training with the Veterans Services Office on campus (if there is one) and/or with the student veterans' organization on campus (if there is one). See also Sander: "research shows that where support services for veterans exist, those students do well in the classroom."??

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