

Challenges veterans face when transitioning from the battlefield to the classroom

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A research team investigating the mental health burden and treatment-seeking behaviors of student veterans attending rural community colleges in the southern United States has found that this population has difficulty integrating into the campus community and needs support to help it succeed.

The [study](#), published in the *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, is the first, to the authors' knowledge, to report on the mental health burden faced by veterans at the community college level.

"Of the 211 student veterans who participated in our study, we heard the stories of 23 veterans who struggled with the aftermath of trauma exposure, and suffered from sleep disturbance, hypervigilance, irritable or aggressive behavior, and difficulty concentrating," said Ann Cheney, an assistant professor in the Center for Healthy Communities in the School of Medicine and a coauthor on the study. "Student veterans often have physical and mental injuries, deployment- and combat-related stress, and family/relationship disruption after deployments. Our findings underscore the need for supportive services in [higher education](#) to integrate student veterans into campus communities and refer them to mental healthcare resources toward improving their [academic success](#)."

Veterans returning from overseas combat often struggle with trauma-related psychological distress that can affect their daily lives and academic performance. Because of this mental health burden, student veterans are more likely to show lower academic achievement and are at

higher risk of dropping out of college.

The research paper notes that returning veterans with [psychological trauma](#) often experience recurrent or involuntary memories, flashbacks, and negative alterations in mood. The authors write that student veterans may have difficulty relating to others, and may perceive student peers as immature and/or their comments as disrespectful. They add that veterans feel separate from the rest of the student body because of their extended gap between high school and college, older average age, and deployment experiences, thus creating additional challenges for them to integrate with the rest of the classroom. Student veterans also may struggle to find a sense of belonging, leading to feelings of isolation.

Cheney and her colleagues did their research in Arkansas, where, by 2010, more than 5,500 veterans used the post-9/11 GI Bill to obtain a higher education. Many veterans attended two- and four-year colleges in rural, underserved areas of the state. Because rural areas have limited resources and healthcare services, the researchers conducted the study at 11 community colleges in rural regions throughout Arkansas, including the medically underserved areas of the Mississippi Delta Region and the Ozark Mountains.

The study was supported by a Department of Defense grant to senior author Geoffrey Curran at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences.

"Understanding the impact of psychological trauma on classroom performance and integration is critical," Curran said. "Events or situations on campus can trigger combat-related traumatic memories. Crowded situations, classroom discussion topics, on-campus accidents, such as someone having a seizure, can trigger traumatic memories and interfere with classroom integration and academic success."

Many of the veterans in the study returned from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and were involved in combat patrols. The researchers used screening tools self-administrated through online surveys to identify student veterans who screened positive for PTSD, generalized anxiety disorder, and/or depression. They used in-depth interviews and conducted focus group discussions to arrive at their results. The main conclusions of the research paper are:

- Many student veterans struggle to relate with the civilian world and their student peers.
- Many struggle to successfully juggle the demands and expectations of marriage and parenthood, employment, and education.
- Events or situations on campus that trigger memories related to combat further complicate the ability of veterans to integrate into the classroom and achieve academic success.
- Student veterans' combat-related trauma exposures do not always fade with the passing of time and can leave enduring psychological scars.
- By following guidelines put forth in VA campus toolkits, higher education can help student veterans who have psychological trauma histories.

"What surprised us was that, even though veterans in our study received GI benefits - full tuition, monthly housing stipends, and textbook money - it was not enough," Cheney said. "They struggled to get by. Consequently, many sought full- or part-time employment, which made it challenging to make it to class, complete homework assignments, and study for tests."

Curran stressed that as veterans increasingly transition from the battlefield to the classroom, more colleges and universities will need to address the unique needs of this student population.

"College and university service providers need to be aware of local VA services and resources so they can refer veterans appropriately," he said.

Cheney and Curran were joined in the research by Joshua Medley (first author) at Harding University; and VA health services investigators Tracy Abraham, Kathleen Grubbs, Liya Lu, John Fortney, and Justin Hunt. Medley, who was a student veteran at the time of the study, was mentored by Cheney. Today he is a captain in the Army National Guard.

"Josh's insight as a student veteran was critical to the interpretation of our data," said Cheney, who led the qualitative component of the study, including the analysis. She worked on the study when she was on the faculty at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences from 2011 to 2014. She joined UC Riverside in 2015.

Provided by University of California - Riverside

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