

2022

Issues Facing Veterans in Higher Education

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Walden University

Abstract

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

Issues facing Veterans in Higher Education

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Charles Amankwaa

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,

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Walden University

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Abstract

Issues Facing Veterans in Higher Education

by

Charles Amankwaa

MA, University of Baltimore, 2018

BS, University of Baltimore, 2013

Professional Administrative Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Public Administration

Walden University

August 2022

Abstract

The American GI Forum (AGIF) contains several programs and initiatives, with the significant focus being on supporting students. There is a need to better understand their needs as students so that the organization can better serve them. This study focused on the issues facing veteran students in higher education and the strategies that AGIF can adopt to better improve veteran students' experiences while in university. The primary theory that guided this study was the appreciative education framework because it offered the theoretical infrastructure for educational practice by advocating for an adaptable, transformational, and interactive framework and was applicable to guiding organizational efforts and individual interactions. Convenience sampling was used to recruit 25 veteran students as participants who had served in the military and were currently enrolled in a higher education program. The participants were interviewed and content analysis of their responses was used to capture their opinions and attitudes about the issues they face while in higher learning institutions. The findings indicated that some of the common challenges faced by veteran students in higher education system include posttraumatic stress disorder, financial issues or distress, gaps in higher education system, and lack of peer support and engagement. Based on these findings, it was recommended that the higher education system ensure the implementation of adequate programs and policies to support veteran students because they face multiple challenges while transitioning from military to civilian life. Through looking out all the given challenges, it explains the need for the administration to set the focus on the ways that they can prevent the occurrence of such challenges through the implementation of the adequate programs that can fully support the veterans.

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Section 1: Introduction to the Problem

There has been an increase in the number of veterans enrolling in colleges and this trend is likely to continue in the future (Kappell, 2017). One of the factors that contribute to the issues facing veteran students is the veteran's service status, including whether they are actively performing their duties or are reservists. Veterans that have experience in combat are aware of difficult life situations (Reisman, 2016). Ghosh et al. (2009) showed that the functional limitations and injuries that veteran students encounter are the primary factors that affect their participation in the college. Student veterans are not a unique population in colleges or universities, but a subgroup that has wide-ranging expectations, life experiences, and educational needs.

Even though veterans are likely to be mature and have broad knowledge and understanding of the challenges in war due to their military services, educators should be aware of veteran students' perceptions during their transition to college. When the institution is aware of these students' needs, it will offer an opportunity for the development of the most appropriate techniques aimed at minimizing their challenges and increasing their success. Addressing the issues facing veteran students in higher education will help in the development of a social support system as well as the ability of veterans to reintegrate into civilian life and access health care services. It is important in enabling veterans to transition well from military life to civilian life by helping them have a better social life that includes interacting with other people in school and developing friendships with nonveteran students.

AGIF has helped in the provision of motivation and education, post-secondary educational opportunities, and scholarships for veterans to attend college, aimed at encouraging veterans to join higher learning institutions (Arrastia-Chisholm et al., 2021). As one of the largest Federally Chartered Hispanic Veterans firms in the country and having chapters in Puerto Rico and different states, the AGIF has helped in the enhancement of educational opportunities among veteran students. It also offers support to Hispanic organizations, including League of United Latin American Citizens, the National Council of La Raza, project SER (Service, Education, and Rehabilitation), and Involved Mexican American Government Employees, among others. The AGIF Corporate Advisory Board offers financial support and technical advice to AGIF. Apart from providing education opportunities to veteran students, the AGIF focuses on advancing equality of justice under the law and political and economic opportunities for all regardless of their nationality, race, or ethnicity (Blanton, 2009). Similarly, it has helped in offering input on legislation enforcement aimed at protecting Hispanic veteran rights and other underrepresented groups. Through the establishment of AGIF Youth Chapters, the AGIF has also been successful in training youth through imparting motivation and leadership values (Angel, 2021). They aim to help with education through trade and academic scholarships to provide better career opportunities.

Problem Statement

The AGIF has played a critical role in struggling for civil rights, including advocating for veterans' benefits, reducing media distortions and stereotyping, and desegregation of schools (Carpio, 2016). The AGIF offers comprehensive services for the service

members that transition from the military to the community as a civilian, including employment services, community reintegration, chemical dependency counseling, and job counseling, among others (Bell et al., 2013). It advocates for improved services and cares for veterans to stabilize and assist them with job placement. The primary consumers include veterans that try to regain their role in their society, homeless veterans, those with a psychological or physical disability creating a barrier to employment, and recently discharged veterans (Stern, 2017). Despite the success in dealing with the issue relating to the Veteran Administration's inability to provide earned benefits under the G.I. Bill of Rights, representation, and hospital care, the AGIF has struggled with dealing with the specific issues facing veterans in higher education.

Over the past years, various researchers have discussed the challenges veterans face in their pursuit of higher education. Mendez et al. (2018) analyzed the experiences of student veterans that had engaged in a transition seminar course using a single case study. The findings indicated that there is a need to provide a purposeful transition process for veterans who decide to pursue higher education. Additionally, previous studies have asserted that drug abuse is a common occurrence for veteran students as compared to nonveteran students (Bell, 2017). Falkey (2016) used a quantitative design to study the Post-9/11 Era transition experiences of veteran officers to increase knowledge about this student population and argued that despite the maturity and understanding inherent to veterans as well as other broader skills gained from their services, educators should be aware of the veteran's' perceptions during their transition to college.

Although the above studies have explored the differences in the experiences of veteran students as they transition to higher education system, very little is known about the specific issues facing veterans, making it difficult for an organization such as the AGIF to determine where it should place its resources. The AGIF management has stated that limited resources and inadequate research has made it challenging for the organization to achieve this goal (Rivas & Aoki, 2012). The AGIF does not receive funding or the necessary resources from the state, local, or federal governments to monitor its activities and operations (Rivas & Aoki, 2012). Over the past years, the AGIF has depended on donations to continue with its efforts of providing the necessary assistance to veteran students in higher education.

Despite these limited resources, the management states that the AGIF has been making efforts to achieve its primary goal. One of the factors contributing to this success is hardworking members and dedicated leaders, such as the Women's and Youth Chapters, whose engagement has played a critical role in strengthening the structure of the AGIF. Inadequate resources have made it challenging for the organization to collect the input of veteran students about their experiences while in college. Such direct input from veterans would be the primary source of information for the development of policies that the AGIF could put in place to achieve its primary goal. The organization required research in this area to increase its awareness about the issues and the most effective solution to its challenges. Therefore, this study played a critical role in increasing the understanding of the issues that face veteran students while in college. It provides relevant information about the issues facing veteran students, which will play a critical role in informing the

AGIF in their future policy decisions. The AGIF can use the findings of this study to design appropriate intervention strategies for assisting the growing number of enrolled student veterans. Research has shown that one of the common reasons why veterans choose to not enroll in higher learning institutions is because they have had disappointments with the benefits and salaries they were offered while they worked (Hannon, 2019). They may also perceive that they were not meant for further education or training, which makes them not able to see the need for pursuing education after their time of service (Hannon, 2019).

Purpose

The primary purpose of this qualitative needs assessment was to provide insights into the issues facing veteran college students to better inform the AGIF regarding veterans' experiences so the organization may develop and plan services and programs to better meet the unique needs of this population, both now and in the future. The study findings offer insights into the most effective strategies to not only address the challenges but also to increase the benefits that veterans gain through the educational process. The guiding research question was: What challenges do veteran students face in their pursuit of higher education?

Nature of the Needs Assessment Study

In this study, I carried out a qualitative needs assessment to document the challenges facing veterans so that the AGIF can formulate future programs based on the veteran students' needs. I conducted qualitative interviews with 25 veterans from three different universities to gather information regarding their experiences in institutions of higher

learning. Needs assessment helped in gaining firsthand insight on the experiences of veteran students in institutions of higher learning (Qu & Dumay, 2011). It also assisted in gathering focused textual data that will help the AGIF in addressing these challenges in addition to uncovering substantial descriptive data of the individual experiences of veteran officers. When the veteran student participants were not on the campus, I requested them to do a phone, Zoom, or Skype interview.

Significance

This research was instrumental in improving the experiences of veteran students in the higher education system by providing critical information to the AGIF regarding their needs. Despite their efforts to address the issues faced by veteran students, the AGIF has limited information about the students' various challenges; hence, the AGIF has difficulties accurately planning for and developing future programming. The AGIF can use these findings to address the needs and concerns of the veteran officers in higher education as well as advise colleges and universities on the best organizational culture to ensure the integration of meeting veteran students' needs into their practices. Through the results of this study, the AGIF will be able to determine the areas that are functioning effectively and those that need adjustments to improve the experiences of veterans in the university setting. The AGIF can also use the study findings to help address some of the challenges likely to affect veteran students after they complete their tertiary education. Colleges and universities can use the findings to design instructional and support approaches, including learner-centered programs that maximize veterans' abilities and capabilities and increase their skills and knowledge. The results of this study can aid

legislators in understanding the rights of veterans so that they pass laws that can ensure the veterans can attend institutions of higher education without problems. Public administrators can use the findings from the needs assessment in planning for the future. For instance, the results provide adequate information on programs relating to veteran affairs and delivering services. Due to the diversity of the veteran students and their broader experiences, it is challenging to adopt a one size that fits all approach to serve them (O'Herrin, 2011). Hence, it is critical that administrators gauge veterans' specific needs at the university before resources are devoted to new initiatives. Administrators will be more likely to craft successful, supportive programs when considering enrolled student veterans' input.

Summary

In this section, I provided an overview of the study topic. Higher learning institutions will find the results of this study helpful in designing appropriate policies to address the needs of veteran students. In section 2, I will outline the theoretical and conceptual framework that formed the basis of the research.

Section 2: Conceptual Approach and Background

Over the past years, veteran students have been experiencing various challenges in the higher education system due to its practices and organizational culture that do not consider the needs of this cohort of students. The primary focus of this study was addressing the policies that the AGIF should implement to improve the experiences of veteran students in higher learning institutions to increase their population. In this section, I will discuss the theory and concepts that guided the research as well as the study's relevance to public organizations. I will also provide an overview of the AGIF by discussing its purpose and the significance of research in the achievement of its goal. The last part will involve a discussion of my role as the doctor of public administration student in researching on behalf of AGIF. The AGIF may use the study findings to determine the factors that affect veterans in the higher education system and develop strategies aimed to improve their experiences.

Concepts, Models, and Theories

In this subsection, I introduce and describe the theories and concepts that grounded this study. The subsection also comprises a review of the relevant scholarly literature on the topic and the theories applicable to this study.

Appreciative education (AE) is a critical framework for guiding higher education professionals' interaction with students, delivering student-centered services, and leading higher education (He et al., 2014). The framework offers a positive and international approach to improve educational enterprises by concentrating on individuals and

organizations' potential and strengths to achieve cocreated goals (Bloom et al., 2013).

This concept is a powerful synthesis of appreciative advising, appreciative inquiry, positive psychology, and social constructivist approaches. AE offers a flexible framework and theoretical infrastructure for educational practice (Bloom et al., 2013). Rather than concentrating on either organizational or individual development, AE advocates for an adaptable, transformational, and interactive framework and is applicable to guide organizational efforts and individual interactions.

Previous studies have applied the AE framework to develop mission-centered learning outcomes by embracing positive mindsets, empowering learners to take ownership of the learning process, and leveraging students' strengths and assets. For example, He et al. (2014) analyzed the need to engage in AE and found greater potential for applying the AE framework in educational settings to offer learners a seamless educational pipeline that develops, leverages, and recognizes their assets and strengths.

Similarly, Bloom and McClellan (2016) discussed a theory-to-practice framework according to the AE model for higher education administrators to adopt to foster creative solutions to address challenges faced by higher education institutions to pursue their desired goals. Their discussion showed that using the AE model helps create an innovative educational environment that can help address all the challenges that face higher education.

Jeffery and Halcomb-Smith (2020) researched different works regarding the concept of AE and found that veterans deserve feedback in their learning process to ensure that they understand their progress. The strength of their study lay in the fact that the authors went

into great detail regarding the issue of AE. They elaborated on the issue of how tutors and veteran students can collaborate to make the educational experience much better than it was in the past for both parties. The weakness of their study can be seen where they do not give leads to other documents that could provide good information regarding the concept of AE. This would have ensured that readers understand other sources that they can use to develop their knowledge regarding the concept. Their study has left enough room for more research regarding AE.

A critical component of AE framework is that, although each student is unique, educators need to concentrate on the populations with greater needs than others (He et al., 2014). It is critical to view learners as individuals as opposed to representatives of a particular group; however, educators should also be aware that students have a likelihood of belonging to groups that may put them in a social or educational disadvantage; therefore, they may require differentiated attention from the teachers. While it might be challenging to find students with identical needs, being knowledgeable of the needs of veteran students in education is vital to increasing the understanding of the issues that they face and the development of strategies to improve their experiences.

Veterans represent a unique population because of their age and experiences. Currently, veterans face multiple challenges in higher education, including social isolation, inability to continue with education, and increased relocation (Steele et al., 2013). Financial issues continue to be the most challenging factor amongst this population (Elbogen et al., 2012). Despite attending college being a positive transition, this experience may be hard and, in some instances, overwhelming for veterans. Returning veterans bring higher maturity and

broader knowledge to global issues due to their military expertise, so educators should show them support during this period. Increasing the awareness of this population's needs from the onset allows for the development of the most appropriate techniques for the minimization of their attrition and enhancement of their chances of success. The students should start with an assessment of the commitment of the institution to provide a military-friendly environment through the creation of on-campus units such as Reserve Officer Training Corps.

Relevance to Public Organizations

The signing of the G.I. Bill of Rights into law by President Franklin Roosevelt on June 22, 1944, resulted in the return of veterans to U.S. universities and colleges (Murray, 2008). One of the common challenges facing veteran students was their inability to reintegrate into civilian life and lack of preparation of the schools to accommodate the influx of veteran students (Borsari et al., 2017). These challenges led to the emergence of more issues for veterans, including the absence of transitional assistance as well as increased shortages in housing (Murray, 2008). The AGIF is an organization that addresses the needs and concerns of U.S. military veterans in higher education. Since its official incorporation in 1948, the AGIF has been at the forefront in the provision of support, resources, and programs to the continuously changing local student veteran organization networks (Rumann et al., 2011).

According to Hannon (2019), there are over 18 million veterans in the United States, and out of these 18 million, the number of student veterans in the year 2013 was a little over 1 million, as indicated by those veterans who have utilized their GI benefits U.S.

Department of Veterans Affairs, n.d.). Since 2013, these numbers were estimated to increase by around 20%, which amounts to approximately 1.25 million veterans (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs., n.d.). While there are aged veterans who may not have an interest in pursuing higher education, the number of veterans who could benefit from higher education is still high, as Hannon (2019) asserted; a fact that prompted the current study. Rumann et al. (2011) explained that the AGIF is an umbrella organization of student veterans' groups that advocate for improvements in veteran educational benefits and to coordinate the scholarly activities of veterans. Given the collective nature of the institution, AGIF will help in providing data on the veterans that are pursuing higher education. The findings of this study will be useful for determining the strategies needed to increase the population of student veterans. The needs assessment is a critical tool for helping organizations such as the AGIF to work with institutions of higher education to determine the gaps that hinder the institutions from realizing their desired goal of providing quality services to all students. Being aware of what is currently working effectively and the areas that require improvements is vital in progressing towards achieving such goals and making universities successful.

Different research could inform veterans regarding how they can navigate their application processes in institutions of higher learning. Veterans could be helped in identifying institutions that give them higher chances of employment to ensure that their college education becomes as meaningful as possible. GIs must be informed to ensure that they plan their college stay long before they are able to join institutions. This planning could be easy for them if they set their priorities early enough, and

consequently, this result in them having a good experience at their institution of choice (Kappell, 2017).

Additionally, GIs must carefully plan the courses they intend to take in college. They could even decide whether they would like to undertake an apprenticeship or another course. It is advisable for the GIs interested in joining college to consult the U.S.

Department of Labor using the apprenticeship finder (Kappell, 2017). In such platforms, they could find courses that offer favorable costs and can offer the best value possible. In some instances, the GIs could discover courses that offer free training to any interested veteran.

As an umbrella organization, AGIF supports over 1,300 schools, which justifies the relevance of the study. The mission of the organization is to establish and maintain a comprehensive community service agency with a diversified funding source that will serve the needs of veterans, their families, and other needy individuals of the community. I conducted this study to help the AGIF achieve its motto of Education is Our Freedom and Freedom Should Be Everybody's Business by providing information about the issues facing veteran students. The initial concern of the AGIF is ending segregation in schools to offer quality education to all veteran students (San Miguel, 1983). Another objective of the AGIF is to bring the concerns of this population to mainstream politicians' attention. Achieving this goal depends on the ability of the AGIF to have adequate information about the issues faced by veteran students in higher education. Thus, this study was necessary to inform the AGIF so they are able to implement the necessary strategies to help improve veteran students' experiences in universities by addressing some of the

issues they face. The findings of this study will help the organization to realize its goal of establishing and maintaining comprehensive community service aimed at serving the needs of veteran students.

Role of the Doctor of Public Administration Student/Researcher

I conducted this study on behalf of the AGIF organization. In the study project, I was the researcher, focusing on the selected target population and analyzing the collected data. Despite the focus of the AGIF on different educational issues that affect veteran students, there is still low enrollment of veterans in top-performing colleges and universities in the country. This factor prompted me to analyze some of the issues facing veteran students in higher education. The results of this study justify the validity of the strategies utilized in it. There was the likelihood of confirmation bias due to the interpretation of the data to support the identified hypothesis. I also omitted some of the data that did not align with the hypothesis.

Summary

I used the AE framework as the guiding theory in this study. Since there is a need to provide a purposeful transition process for veterans who decide to pursue higher education, I carried out this study to determine different strategies that the AGIF can adopt to improve veteran students' experiences while in universities. Section 3 will include an outline of the methodology used in the study as well as a discussion of the participants and data analysis process.

Section 3: Data Collection Process and Analysis

In this study, I analyzed some of the issues that face veteran students in the higher education system to better inform the AGIF regarding veteran experiences so the organization may improve the planning and development of services and programs to meet the student population's unique needs. In addition to the challenges veterans face during the transition from military to civilian life, adapting to college life may also be a challenge (Kappell, 2017). Due to the struggles that some veterans experienced in high school, it may be hard for them to fit into the education system. Communicating and collaborating with other students across the institution is also sometimes a struggle for veteran students (Howe & Shpeer, 2019). Therefore, universities and colleges that provide educational programs to this population should ensure the implementation of appropriate policies that support the veterans in adapting to college life.

In this section, I discuss the research methodology used in the study, including the design, target population, and synthesis of data. Additionally, the section includes an examination of the sources of evidence, published outcomes, and previous research on the topic. I also discuss the archival and operational data as well as the evidence generated from the needs assessment in the study, which included the following steps: setting objectives, selecting the audience, collecting data, selecting audience sample, picking an instrument, and then analyzing the data

Setting of Objectives

I had the following two objectives in this study: (a) to examine issues facing veteran students and (b) to understand the most effective strategies to use in addressing the veteran students' issues.

Practice-Focused Questions

The following two practice-focused questions guided this study:

Question 1: What are the most significant issues facing veteran students in their transition to higher education system?

Question 2: What strategies can help to improve the experience of veteran students in higher education setting?

I conducted this study on behalf of the AGIF to provide them with insights into the issues that face the veteran student population as well as the most appropriate strategies to use to addressing these issues and make the veterans' learning environment effective.

Sources of Evidence

Since the AGIF offers different services to veteran students, it is challenging to determine with certainty the challenges that hold back veteran students from achieving their goals.

Therefore, conducting a needs assessment was crucial because it helped the organization determine what prevents veteran students from realizing their desired goals. According to

Norman et al. (2015), there are gaps in veteran students' skills, practices, or knowledge.

Determining what is working successfully and what the organization needs to change is vital to help the AGIF work towards accomplishing their mission and be successful. The needs assessment conducted in the current study helped to address the relevant concerns

from all levels to develop a plan with specific actions for improvement. The effectiveness of any plan and action depends on having up-to-date and accurate information on veteran students' needs. The needs assessment was vital in framing both problems and opportunities veteran students face as well as building the necessary relationships to help deal with the identified challenges (see Garira, 2020).

The needs assessment carried out in this study provided the basis for action and planning to improve veteran students' experiences, performance, and learning outcomes in higher education institutions by indicating how to align resources and strategy and which goals to set for future action as well as providing justifications, insights, and/or data for decision making (see McCawley, 2009). The basic premise for the AGIF is to serve the veterans by addressing their needs and concerns while in universities or colleges. The best way to help the organization fulfill this goal was by determining the needs of this student population. Therefore, I conducted a needs assessment to determine the issues that face veteran students and help design effective intervention approaches to improve their experiences. Nugraha et al. (2018) showed that the primary aim for conducting a needs assessment is gathering accurate information representative of the group under study. It is also useful in determining the current situation and identifying issues for action while establishing the necessary basis for crucial planning. Conducting a needs assessment is among the most critical tools available for involving the veteran students in developing goals and solving their problems (Gupta, 2011). The use of a needs assessment in this study was the best way to engage veteran students and have them contribute to the study outcomes.

Evidence Generated for the Administrative Study

Research has shown that veteran students encounter the logistic challenges of transitioning from the military to higher education (Borsari et al., 2017). Since many veteran students enlist in the military as emerging adults and work under the structured military environment, they lack the desired skills to navigate the available services outside the military setting context. Most veteran students are unaware of their eligibility for various helpful services, including the Veteran Benefits Administration and community programs (Morgan et al., 2020). Despite the ability to access these services, they struggle with effective coordination and to fully utilize the different programs (Elliott et al., 2011). For instance, it is challenging to manage finances related to education. While the veterans' educational benefits help in covering tuition, it does not include money for all the different fees charged by colleges and universities. Additionally, veteran students must incur out-of-pocket tuition and other benefits unless they have correctly processed and filed all the necessary paperwork. This process may take an extended period, which places veteran students under financial distress. There are other issues related to academic credit. Although veteran students are likely to complete their applied training and academic coursework throughout their military service, some institutions do not award credit for military training (Giardello & Appel, 2019). Furthermore, despite veteran students overcoming challenges and other barriers hindering them from enrolling in college, like admission testing, benefit eligibility, and applications, retaining them in schools is challenging (Kirchner, 2015). Radford (2009) showed that more than 40% of part-time veteran students and 15% of full-time veterans

dropped out of colleges within the first academic year after enrollment. Regardless of this population's academic engagement characteristics, veteran status has been shown to have a negative association with grade point average (Whiteman et al., 2013). Some of the contributing factors include increased demand on their time and attention, the likelihood of being married and having children, and working full time. Such competing commitments can affect their academic performance and degree completion. Veteran students also experience challenges in adapting to the civilian world from their hierarchical military environment, and this is evident in their time management skills, responsibilities, and unwillingness to ask for assistance (Howe & Shpeer, 2019).

In this study, I interviewed student veterans to obtain data for the AGIF. This data collection method was appropriate because it facilitated open-ended responses from the target population for the development of in-depth knowledge. The primary informants regarding issues facing veteran students in higher education institutions were the people with firsthand information on the topic and who understood the primary issue under investigation due to their experience with the system. The in-depth qualitative interviews allowed the participants to discuss the problems they encountered in higher education institutions. By establishing rapport with and making the participants feel comfortable, I was able to gather insightful responses on sensitive questions.

Participants

The participants in this study were veteran students that were currently studying in higher education institutions either on campus or through online platforms. I used convenience sampling because it helped recruit participants that were easily accessible and convenient.

The population was relevant because they could provide firsthand accounts and data of the challenges that students face virtually and physically. I targeted 30 veteran students in the study. The inclusion criteria included participants that had served in the military for more than 10 years and were enrolled in higher education programs, whether online or on campus. The study also focused on veteran students from different age groups. I had to change the age requirement criteria because the initial number of respondents that had served in the military more than 10 years was inadequate. A change was made to also include participants that had served less than 10 years in the military to ensure a large response rate. I did not offer any rewards to convince members of the target population to participate in the study. The data collection took place over the course of 2 weeks.

Procedures

The AGIF provided me with approval to conduct the research and acknowledged the importance of the selected topic in the development of their strategy and increasing their knowledge so they may better serve their veterans. The organization was also willing to commit resources and continuous feedback to the study, and the resources included relevant veteran information. Recruitment of potential participants to the research included various phases, such as identifying, approaching, and obtaining the target population's consent to engage in the research. The AGIF helped identify the participants since they have records of veterans who have enrolled at higher education institutions located in various regions across the state. I also worked with the deans of students and student leaders from the three institutions to identify and approach potential participation with the help of the AGIF.

This type of nonprobability sampling approach was based on the collected data from the veteran students that were conveniently available to participate in the research. My approach included getting participants from different higher learning institutions in the region. I invited all the veteran students to participate in the study. I maintained the ethical protection of the participants throughout the course of the study, including assuring the participants the data collected would be kept confidential and that I would not disclose any personal data when reporting the findings of the study. The participants' anonymity was preserved, and they were provided with a chance to participate voluntarily without being coerced to do so.

To ensure reliability in this qualitative study, I examined the trustworthiness of the respondents. In a qualitative study, the goal is to ensure participant engagement in a way that probes for deeper understanding than examining just the surface features.

Data Collection Instrument

I developed a set of interview questions to help explore the practice-focused questions of the study. All eight interview questions were relevant to the practice-focused questions. The draft interview questions were reviewed by the AGIF before data collection began. These questions are available in the Appendix A.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

I used content analysis to capture the opinions and attitudes of veteran students about the issues they face while in higher learning institutions. Their interview responses were analyzed thematically through coding and the close examination of data for the identification of broad patterns and themes.

I used reflexive thematic analysis in analyzing the data collected from the qualitative interview of each veteran student. Despite the various similarities between qualitative content analysis and reflexive thematic analysis, such as searching for themes and patterns and cutting across data, the primary difference is in the opportunity for data quantification (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Content analysis uses a descriptive approach to code and interpret data; while thematic analysis offers a purely qualitative and detailed data account (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Thematic analysis is used to identify, interpret, and categorize themes (i.e., patterns of the meaning) within a qualitative data set (Braun et al., 2019). This concept of analysis was proposed by Braun and Clarke (2019).

Reflexive thematic analysis fits research questions associated with how people perceive things, their experiences, and their views (Bell, 2017). Veteran students encounter different challenges in institutions of higher learning that prevent them from enrolling in advanced learning (Babin, 2019).

In this study, I followed the six steps of conducting reflective thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2018):

Familiarize with the data: This is the first step of reflexive thematic analysis. The researcher reads and re-reads the contents of the findings to understand.

The coding process: This is the stage of formulating and coming up with succinct labels (i.e., codes). These succinct labels play an integral role in establishing words or phrases that are used in answering the statement of the problem. In this research work, the identified codes included, drug abuse, lack of friends, mental health, depression,

isolation, and lack of proper advice. These were the codes used in establishing the problems faced by veteran students in the institutions of higher learning.

Formulation and identification of themes: In this stage, themes are developed from the identified codes.

Review and revision of themes: In this stage, themes are analyzed to establish their relevance in responding to the problem statement. Additionally, in this phase, themes are regrouped into smaller groups (i.e., subthemes). This is also the stage of eliminating irrelevant themes.

The definition and naming of themes: This is the stage of establishing the main idea or focus behind each theme.

Writing up: This is the last phase of reflexive thematic analysis. At this point, the extracts of data and analytical narratives are integrated. It included documenting the findings of the research based on the common issues facing veteran students in higher education system. The outcomes showed that veteran students face different challenges in higher education.

Summary

In this section, I discussed the different methods used to collect and analyze the data. This section included a discussion of the interview questions, codes developed, and themes identified. In the following section, I will provide an evaluation and recommendations.

Section 4: Evaluation and Recommendations

With this study, I aimed to gain insight into veteran students' issues when pursuing higher education to inform the AGIF so the organization may improve their planning and development of services and programs to meet this population's unique needs.

Conducting a needs assessment was crucial because it helped the organization determine the challenges that prevent veteran students from realizing their desired goals. The practice-focused questions were aimed at determining the issues veteran students face as they transition to higher education system and the strategies the AGIF can implement to improve veteran students' experiences. In this section, I present the study findings and offer recommendations on policies the AGIF should implement to address the identified challenges.

Findings and Implications

I targeted 30 veteran students in the higher education system for this study, but only 25 responded to the interview questions, representing a response rate of 83.33%. Table 1 represents the demographic characteristics of the research participants. The percentage of male veteran students interviewed was 84%, while female students were 16% of the total respondents. Of the total respondents, 36% were White Americans, 32% Black Americans, 12% Asian Americans, and 20% Native Americans. The respondents were between 25 and 60 years old and had served in the military for at least 5 years. Most of the respondents indicated that they only had military and high school education and training. While a significant percentage of the respondents had served in United States

and Canada, others indicated that they were deployed in Afghanistan and Israel. They all agreed having participated in war at least once in their career.

List of tables

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Research Participants

Variable	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Male	21	84%
Female	4	16%
Age		
Less than 25	1	4%
25–34	2	8%
35–45	6	24%
46–50	10	40%
Above 50	6	24%
Race		
White	9	36%
Black	8	32%
Asian	3	12%
Native	5	20%
American		
Years in service		
5 years	4	16%
5–10 years	11	44%

More than 10	10	40%
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years

The college learning environment presents unique challenges to veteran students compared to traditional students because of the variations in military and college life structure. In the research findings, I identified themes relating to the practice-focused questions that played a crucial role in providing insights into the reduced graduation rate among veteran students. Evidence from the data collected from the interviews showed that all the respondents agreed they faced significant challenges while transitioning to the higher education system. The recurring themes from the participants' interview responses are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Thematic Structure

Theme	Subthemes	Codes
Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)	Differences in mood and cognition. Intrusive flashback, memories, and thoughts. Severe trauma Deployment-related stressor	There are a significant percentage of veteran students suffering from PTSD. However, cognitive behavioral therapy plays a crucial role in PTSD treatment.
Financial issues/distress	Material challenges Lack of school fees Increased dropout rates	The material challenge was a problem for veteran students because it reduced their ability to afford a university education.
Gaps in higher education system	Conventional student identity formation. High attrition rates Perceived unfavorable environment.	The primary identity as soldiers means the conventional student identity formation theories are non-applicable to them. The high attrition

		rates among veteran students showed the challenges with transitioning to the higher education system instead of the other secondary factors.
Lack of peer support and engagement	Peer support groups impact. Pro-social behavior. Integrating peer support groups in education environment. Expanding or replacing current social support.	Veteran students enrolling in higher education system should become more active in the development and application of explicit interventions that focus on social support.

Theme 1: Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

One of the guiding practice-focused questions was: What are the most significant issues facing veteran students transitioning to the higher education system? The participants showed that most veteran students have visible and nonvisible disabilities, like traumatic brain injury, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and physical injuries, because of the missions they participated in in previous years. Their inability to discuss such injuries affects their ability to focus in college. To maintain their confidentiality, the participants

are referred to by number, such as Veteran Student 1 (VS1), Veteran Student 2 (VS2), etc. VS1 and VS2 indicated that attending wars in other countries affected their mental health because of the adverse experiences, including dealing with dead bodies and losing friends and colleagues. VS1 stated that the war in Israel made him depressed because he lost one of his friends. Similarly, VS2 indicated that he had problems with focus, memory, thinking, and other functions, making him often suffer from mood and pain disorders. VS5 noted that although there was on-campus support to readjust to the academic world, the institution lacked the adequate capacity to help veteran students with PTSD with the integration process. VS10 attributed the issue to the difficulty in diagnosing PTSD, noting that most mental health experts in the higher education system lack adequate knowledge of the sociological and psychological implications of PTSD because it might take more time for the symptoms to appear. Such delay between the appearance of symptoms and military service causes complications for veteran students' accessing treatment.

Theme 2: Financial Issues/Distress

Although financial challenges are a common problem affecting most college students, they are prevalent among veteran students because of family needs and the increased number of dependents. VS9 stated that military life is characterized by continuous movement and transfers that result in unexpected costs, explaining, "Such factors are among the primary contributors to my credit problems history." Another respondent, VS3, said that he is a victim of thinking based on the monthly payment when buying big-ticket items, including a car or house, stating, "It only took a few big-ticket purchases

before my monthly income was tied up; making me broke even before receiving the paycheck.” VS2 said that, I had to defer 1 academic year because of lack of school fees, delaying my graduation.” VS9, VS10, VS14, and VS18 all indicated they have high-interest private loans to pay. VS10 stated that his time in service does not allow him to be granted the full percentage of the Post 9/11-GI Bill, leaving him to pay the tuition fee balance out of pocket. VS14 said that it has been challenging to get scholarships, preventing him from pursuing the Post 9/11-GI Bill for 4 years because he has to incur the full expense of the remaining years. Although most respondents agreed that the G.I. Bill had generated significant financial benefits, they indicated that the financial challenges contribute to higher dropout rates.

Theme 3: Gaps in Higher Education System

As part of the transition to college, veteran students have to address issues related to reintegration into the school culture or learning environment. They have been away from school for years, and the education system does not always have adequate personnel and capacity to address their needs. Contrary to the U.S. Armed Forces, an established direction and structure are missing in the higher education system. According to VS7, the college environment is different than what he was used to as a serviceman. He noted that the university environment is adaptable and open to the needs of the students, which is very different from the U.S military.

Having the primary identity of soldier means that veteran students face unique challenges because of their experience in wars that other students may not encounter. Conventional counseling practices in higher education may be inadequate to address these issues. The

high attrition rates among veteran students in the current study showed the challenges with transitioning to the higher education system instead of the other secondary factors. For instance, VS8 stated, “I dropped out of school during my first year of study when I perceived an unfavorable environment.” VS6 and VS12 agreed that there is a high attrition rate among veteran students because of the challenges of transitioning into civilian life. VS17 said that, “I think there is a disconnection between higher education and military service that makes me feel like I am in a different world while in the campus.”

Theme 4: Lack of Peer Support and Engagement

In this study, the participants reported that lack of peer support and engagement in student activities influenced their college outcomes, which aligns with Falkey’s (2016) findings that it was challenging for veteran students to follow college culture and rules. VS4, VS20, and VS22 said they feel isolated and ignored by other students. Specifically, VS20 narrated the isolation he encountered while on campus by saying, “I would attend my class without talking to anyone and go back.” VS22 stated that he was part of a group where each person looked out for others, “I found it challenging to make connections with other students that they consider less disciplined and unable to understand my experience. In most instances, I feel alone.” VS17 was among the people that proposed the need for establishing a veteran’s student organization at his campus. VS4 indicated that “most of the students are unwilling to interact with veteran students. You try to interact with them, but they ignore you. I wondered if it is the age difference.” Additionally, VS23 recalled his first experience in college while trying to register for his

classes, apply for financial aid, and deal with all the details about the enrollment process, stating, “It is a frustrating process to integrate to college life after getting out of service and not knowing how to do certain things while getting inadequate support from other students or university staff.”

The outcomes of the research align with the AE theory. The respondents indicated that they face challenges in the higher education systems that prevent them achieving their goals. For example, PTSD prevented them from seeking professional help from university counseling department because the counselors did not understand their issues. Similarly, the school culture does not align with military practices, resulting in culture shock.

According to the AE approach, higher learning institutions should implement strategies that maximize veteran students’ strengths to improve their educational experiences. Since veteran students lack peer support and engagement, there is a need for universities and colleges to develop an adaptable, transformational, and interactive framework to guide organizational efforts and individual interactions. Addressing these challenges will help the higher education system in creating an innovative educational environment that can help in dealing with challenges faced by veteran students.

In this study, I aimed to outline some of the issues facing veteran students in the higher education system to inform the AGIF policy formulation to improve this population’s experience. Data were collected from 25 students who had served in the military and had enrolled in higher education programs, whether online or on campus. It was challenging to recruit participants that met these criteria; therefore, I had to compromise some of the

initial characteristics in sample selection by including respondents that had served less than 10 years in the military. This action likely affected the study outcomes because respondents with less than 5 years of military experience may not have provided adequate information about the topic.

The study findings indicate the need for students, colleges, and other institutions and systems like the AGIF to collaborate to improve veteran students' experiences and graduation rate. For instance, each student should understand the strategies to navigate the higher education system and seek help when necessary. Universities and colleges should foster an environment that considers the unique needs of veteran students to ensure the smooth transition from military to civilian life and provide support opportunities and diverse teaching practices. Other organizations such as the AGIF should advocate for policies to address challenges facing veteran students and offer financial support to increase completion rates. Since veteran students bring unique experiences to the higher learning education system, it is vital to implement programs that accommodate their experiences. Ensuring the service members reintegrate into civilian society effectively requires adaptation and flexibility from the community and service members (Cooper et al., 2018).

Recommendations

Since the transition to college life is characterized by multiple challenges as is transitioning to civilian life, the higher education system should ensure the implementation of adequate programs and policies to support the veteran student population. Veteran students face unique problems that increase the probability of

dropping out of college (Falkey, 2016). Colleges and universities should train employees on the challenges faced by veteran students to improve veteran students' experiences. Empirical evidence indicates the need for veteran students to consult and interact with faculty members who understand the military culture and empathize with their current situation (Walter, 2019). One of the ways colleges can achieve this goal is through training staff members on military culture. This would help educate faculty members about challenges the military service members will face and effective ways of communicating and supporting them in class.

The research findings indicated that in addition to veterans' benefits and financial aid, there is the need for higher learning institutions to consider accepting credit for military training. Available evidence indicates that the length of time taken by a student to complete a degree is positively correlated to a decreased likelihood of reaching graduation (Jenner, 2017). There should be clearly defined policies for evaluating military training and experience for credit. There is no need for veteran students transferring to universities to retake a similar course to one they had previously completed and passed.

Strength and Limitations of the Project

In this study, I adequately highlighted some of the issues veterans face in the higher education system and policies to improve their experiences during the transition. Colleges and universities and other organizations like the AGIF will find this research helpful in laying the foundation to training faculty members about the specific needs of the veteran student population. The findings of this study also add to the available evidence on

veteran student issues in higher education. The results can be used to help the AGIF design programs that address these challenges and improve veteran students' graduation rates. One limitation of this study is the need for diverse data from participants to address the multiple issues that could arise. Although the collected data from the interviews could help generalize concepts and problems faced by veteran students, it does not convey all the challenges that face the global veteran student population because of the diverse issues each veteran student is likely to encounter. The limited scope indicates that the findings cannot be applied across the United States and globally. Additionally, it is challenging to standardize the challenges facing veteran students across the country because of the uniqueness of the higher education system and leaders. Future studies should focus on interviewing diverse populations in different areas to promote the generalization of the research findings. It is also critical to assess other challenges veteran students face in the higher education system apart from the ones covered in this study.

Summary

In this section, I discussed the findings of the study by grouping them into the four themes of PTSD, financial issues or distress, gaps in higher education system, and lack of peer support and engagement themes. Furthermore, the findings were related to the AE theory through a discussion of the relationship between promoting an effective learning environment and addressing challenges faced by veteran students. I concluded the Section by making recommendations on how to address the challenges unveiled by the study and presenting the strengths and limitations of the project.

Section 5: Dissemination Plan

This study will help the AGIF achieve its motto of; Education is Our Freedom and Freedom Should Be Everybody's Business, by providing information about the issues facing veteran students. To disseminate the research findings, I carefully design a plan after considering the audience characteristics. The initial step will involve determining the specific person in the AGIF whom to present the outcomes and the methods to use to. This will include making a formal presentation with research questions, methodological approaches, significant findings, recommendations, and critical takeaways. I prefer a roundtable presentation emphasizing discussion to highlight how the results will help the AGIF implement policies that improve veteran students' experiences in the higher education system. To ensure effective dissemination, I will rely on person-to-person communications, meetings, and conferences. The process will include presenting the findings report on issues facing veterans in higher education and the recommended strategies to improve their experience.

Summary

In this study, I analyzed veteran students' issues to inform the AGIF so they may improve the planning and development of services and programs to meet this population's unique needs. The primary question was: What challenges do veteran students face in their pursuit of higher education? The findings indicated that respondents face significant challenges while transitioning to the higher education system. My final recommendation is for the AGIF to implement programs and policies that address the needs of the veteran

student population. Future research should focus on more challenges and including diverse people as participants to facilitate the generalization of the research findings.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Draft Set of Interview Questions

The transition from military life to civilian life is associated with many challenges. What are the different ways of coping with the transition from military life to college life?

What challenges have you faced transitioning from military life to being a student?

Institutions of higher learning that serve or wish to admit veteran students have support programs and policies in place to make sure your needs are adequately met. What are some of such programs or policies in this institution?

Have you ever considered leaving prior to the completion of your program? If so, what would you say leads to your thinking about it?

Inadequate or total lack of basic military knowledge on some professors has proven to be a challenge to understanding the needs of students with military knowledge. Describe your professors.

What is your general take on the drug abuse among the veteran students?

Do you find any age variation between the veteran students' age groups? How do you think the age variations affect you?

In your opinion, what should the institution do to better the university experience of most of the veteran students?

What advice can you give to a veteran who wishes to join the university?