

# **Creating Change: Supporting Native-American Student Veterans at the University and in the First-Year Composition Classroom**

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## **Who Is the Typical Southeastern Student?**

Our university, rurally located, serves both urban and rural populations. In 2019, the undergraduate enrollment represented 3,154 students, mostly state residents, with 30% representing Native Americans. Fifty percent of students are 18 to 22 years old, compared to 60% nationwide. A majority of SE students live off-campus and have employment. SE is a “military-friendly school” with a high enrollment of veterans or G.I. Bill users. In 2016, G.I. Bill users represented 7% ( $n = 230$ ). Of these users, approximately 50% were veterans, and the rest represented military dependents.

Nevertheless, student veterans at SE still report struggling, as they do at universities nationwide. Compared to their nontraditional counterparts, 60% of veterans report greater issues becoming acculturated to the university (Fain, 2012). For many student veterans, entering college represents the “most difficult transition of all” (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009).

## **Southeastern Student Retention and Graduation Rates**

Despite services provided for the veterans, as well as the overall student population, our university’s freshmen retention rate represents 64%, below the national average of 72.3%. Moreover, only 11.7% of students graduate in a timely manner, and 28.8% finish at all. According to prospects at similar institutions, students at our locale should be graduating at a rate of 39.4%. Thus, at this locale, like elsewhere nationwide, some students, including veterans, face persistence issues.

## **Issues Affecting Student Veterans’ Persistence and Graduation Rates**

Various issues affect student veterans’ persistence and graduation rates. As adult learners, veterans juggle school, jobs, and families (Blaauw-Hara, 2017). Eighty-five percent of student veterans are aged 24 to 40, almost half are married and have children (NCSL, 2016), and 42% work full time (American Council on Education (ACE, 2014). Sixty-two percent of student veterans represent first-generation college students, as opposed to 43% of their non-military peers (NCSL, 2013). Moreover, some student veterans are addressing medical and psychological issues (Rudd, 2011). Given this

dynamic, factors bolstering students' persistence and success rates must continue to be investigated.

### **National Statistics for Native Americans Providing a Context for Native American Student Veterans**

Here, we want to focus our discussion of student veterans on Native American student veterans specifically. Native Americans or Indigenous Peoples have been called the United States' most disenfranchised population (Smith, 2012). Native Americans possess the smallest secondary and postsecondary graduation rates of any race (National Center for Education, 2013). They also experience the most mental health issues (Huang, 2012). For Native Americans, the median yearly income is \$33,627, and one-fourth live in poverty (U.S. Census, 2010).

### **Native American Veteran Participation and History**

Native Americans represent a valuable portion of the military often overlooked (U.S. Department of Defense, 2012). Although the nation's smallest pan-ethnic segment, signifying one percent of the population, Native Americans possess the largest per capita military participation rate of any ethnic group, with one in three active in some capacity (U.S. Census, 2010). In the Americas, Native Americans have taken part in military conflicts since the colonies were formed (MacGregor, 1994). Until the late 1800s, they served in segregated units and were drafted during World War I, even though many could not claim national citizenship. In World War I and II, the Apache, Navajo, and Choctaw acted as "code talkers" in the Pacific corridor but nevertheless did not receive the right to vote until 1948 and 1962, respectively (Burhansstipanov, 2000).

### **Native American Veteran Participation and Outcomes**

In 2013, Native Americans represented more than 150,000 veterans (U.S. Government). Native Americans enlist at the highest rate per capita of any ethnicity, and the majority report having a "positive veteran identity," even though they face the most violence and war atrocities of any racial group, and 46% have suffered a military-related health issue or injury (Harada, 2005). Tribal veterans also represent the largest veteran population living rurally (Tsai, 2014), with limited access to community resources and jobs. In 2010, tribal veterans' unemployment rate was 8.7%, with those on tribal lands most affected (U.S. Government, 2013). Tribal males enjoy the biggest benefit in enlisting of any racial group and of the sexes (Sampson & Laub, 1996). However, because career realization and educational achievement intertwine, lower educational attainment for many tribal veterans leads them to take lesser occupational positions (Cohen, Warner, & Segal, 1992).

### **Creating Cohort Courses for Student Veterans: An Overview**

Because student veterans, and especially veterans from racial minorities, face unique challenges, administrators and faculty might consider tailoring classes toward them to facilitate their transition to college. Administrators and faculty founding military-affiliated cohorts or learning communities (LCs) can promote the goals of a diverse student population and help to fulfill students' requisites as they begin higher education. As an

underrepresented and vulnerable population, veterans may benefit from first-year cohort courses, even when embedded within larger classes without a specific overall student affiliation.

### **Offering Student Veteran Cohort Courses at Southeastern**

At Southeastern, recently, Hembrough created a voluntary first-year composition cohort course serving veterans, service-members, and students with a military background by offering military-based readings; assigning students to compose a profile essay, with the option of featuring a veteran; and focusing on student veterans' past occupations and future plans, which might have featured or now embrace the military.

### **Rationale for Cohort Courses for Student Veterans**

Previously, our university had offered no classes for student veterans, and my department and institutional partners had held limited dialogues about strategies to aid them. To find ways to serve military-affiliated students, Hembrough had spoken to composition instructors and student veterans and surveyed student veterans. Some student veterans were disappointed with traditional first-year composition courses since they wanted veteran companionship; were distracted by traditional students' texting, internet activity, and entrances and exits; desired respect as adult learners with unique backgrounds; and needed faculty to value their military affiliation and accommodate events surrounding their being called up or deployed.

### **Cohort Courses for Student Veterans at Southeastern**

Likewise, Hembrough learned that some veterans had fallen behind in or failed first-year composition, due to undocumented absences or incomplete assignments, because they felt troubled reporting the following: medical/counseling appointments, ongoing injuries, and PTSD episodes or military-related observance periods. With this knowledge, Hembrough communicated with the Registrar's Office, faculty, and administrators to launch my Composition I and II cohort courses, which would also include a civilian component in order to meet course enrollments and provide for the greatest amount of student diversity.

### **Southeastern Cohort Courses for Student Veterans: Camaraderie**

Here, Hembrough is going to focus on the two Composition II military cohort course sections offered last spring. There were four veterans, with three being Native American and one being Caucasian. The other 14 students were civilians, and the civilian component included those from multiple races. Of the cohort's positive outcomes, most importantly, according to an end-of-the-semester survey, all student-veterans ( $n = 4$ ) believed that the course gave them a caring space in which to share their military status, which represented their primary reason for enrolling. Replicating campus demographics, the student veterans varied in age, race, home state, major, and branch, but all enjoyed the course's communal setting, which they likened to the military's sense of family.

### **Cohort Courses for Student Veterans: Readings and Presentations**

As part of the military-themed curriculum in the Composition II course, students read Maxine Hong Kingston's *Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace* (2006); *Redeployment* (2014) by veteran, Phil Klay; and *Yellow Birds* (2012) by veteran, Kevin Powers. Additionally, Hembrough asked two veterans to present to students, including a faculty member as well as Paul Reed, author of the nonfiction, Vietnam account, *Kontum Diary* (1997). Students identified these presentations as their favorite class activity.

### **The Profile Essay: Veteran Interviews and Resulting Themes**

For their profile essays, all Composition II students, both veterans and civilians, opted to interview a veteran. Students wrote about the typical motifs one might expect concerning veterans: bravery, patriotism, testing one's limits, learning new cultures, and leaving and returning home. Nevertheless, encouraging students to make their own findings also prompted them to generate a more personal and individualized understanding of the military. This undertaking seemed especially pertinent in exposing and dislodging our culture's stereotypes concerning both veterans and Native Americans. Outside the classroom, the tribal veterans, discussing their feelings concerning their dual identity, had reported facing a set of compounded social labels, including their association with alcoholism, homelessness, insanity, having a non-verbal nature, displaying violent tendencies as either a "ticking time bomb" or "savage," and being ruled by a collective culture instead of acting independently.

### **Continued research questions**

At our institution, we lose a significant number of student veterans every semester, typically around 37.5% of student veterans do not continue after their first semester of enrolling in general education classes. Therefore, we want to know answers to the following questions. What could our institution do to improve first-year composition outcomes for veterans or another cohort group? What resources could help our veterans graduate? Why are some veterans more resilient, with better outcomes than others?

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

Participants were 59 veterans who were currently enrolled at our university, 38 (64.4%) men and 21 (35.6%) women, recruited from a midwestern university participant pool. The sample was composed of primarily White ( $n = 41$ ), Native American (10) and mixed ethnicity (8) representing the remaining participants. The average age of the sample was 30.5 years old ( $SD = 3.76$ ), ranging from 18 to 60.

### **Materials and Procedure**

We recruited veteran students who were enrolled at the university, using a confidential recruitment tool known as Sona-Systems. Volunteer participants completed

an online survey including questions from RAND's Military Veterans' Experiences Survey (Steele, Salcedo, & Coley, 2010) and the Scale of Protective Factors (SPF-24; Ponce-Garcia, Madewell, & Kennison, 2015), a measure designed to assess cognitive and social protective factors that are determinants of overall resilience. We also asked about students' demographics; course-format preferences, differentiating between on-ground and distance-learning classes; educational and career goals and background; major; and social support systems.

The *RAND Corporation Survey* (Steele et al., 2010) includes 32 questions assessing student veteran concerns and interests. For the purposes of understanding some of the challenges to veteran students that are important to their ability to matriculate, we included 22 questions. For example, we asked student veterans to explain their level of challenge with many factors of academic life, including the ability to financially support themselves and/or their family, enroll in the courses needed for their degree plan, balance coursework with other responsibilities, meet professors' academic expectations, and locate peers or staff who comprehend the perspective of a military-affiliated person. Students reported their perceptions of each concern, with scores ranging from '1 – *minor challenge*' to '4 – *major challenge*.' Refer to Steele and others (2010) for the published survey items.

The *Scale of Protective Factors - 24* (SPF-24; Ponce-Garcia, Madewell, & Kennison, 2015) consists of twenty-four items assessing adult resilience. Within the SPF-24, there are four subscales measuring social and cognitive protective factors known to determine adult resilience, including social support, social skills, planning and prioritizing behavior, and goal efficacy. Participants' responses indicate their agreement level with each item scored on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from '1 – *disagree completely*' to '5 – *completely agree*.' Higher scores indicate higher resilience. Sub-sample items included statements such as, "*My friends and/or family are supportive of one another*" or "*My friends and/or family spend free time together*." In the present study, we focus on the two social protective factors of social support and social skills. The internal consistency reliability, Cronbach's alpha, for the two subscales of the SPF-24 were high, with social support = .97 and social skills = .98.

## **Qualitative Results**

First, we wanted to evaluate the open-ended questions from the RAND survey to locate and identify common themes presented in the student veterans' responses. When we asked student veterans to respond to the following question, "*In your past and current education experiences, what supports were most helpful in your efforts to succeed on campus?*" Their responses were positive, supportive, and indicative of an institution who is significantly assisting our student veterans. Review common responses in Table 1.

**TABLE 1. SOCIAL SUPPORT IS KEY**

<p><i>“All the teachers have been very <b>helpful</b>. I work full time in the oilfield, drill one weekend a month, have a wife and four kids, and go to school full time. They go above and beyond for all their students.”</i></p>	<p>Aviation major</p>
<p><i>“With small children and a full-time job, <b>online</b> classes have been very beneficial. <b>I can choose</b> when I do my homework and the professors are very understanding.”</i></p>	<p>Master of Business Student</p>
<p>47% of students reported that teachers/professors were a strong support system (<math>N = 28</math>).</p>	

Note.  $N = 59$  veteran students

### Native American Veteran Social Support

Next, we wanted to why some veterans are more resilient than others, especially when focusing on Native American veterans. Social Support is defined as a protective factor that can help someone overcome risk, in that they have the ability to locate support from friends and/or family members (Ponce-Garcia, Madewell, & Kennison, 2015). Of the ten Native American veteran students in our sample, they reported high rates of social support when we summed their sub-scale scores from the Scale of Protective Factors – 24, to show that their total social support scores were higher than those of the White veteran students. Due to the low numbers of participants in our sample, we did not achieve statistically significant differences, but the differences showed that the Native American veteran students ( $M = 5.24$ ) reported higher rates of perceived social support systems in comparison to the White veteran students ( $M = 3.11$ ).

Furthermore, we explored the qualitative questions to evaluate the sentiments of the Native American veteran students. One Native American retired veteran student who was in his late-thirties stated, *“My biggest support system would have to be my family they are constantly pushing me to be better.”* Another Native American veteran student in his late-twenties stated, *“This is my first semester to have any classes on campus and thus far the experience has been positive. I am also a Choctaw member and Waykya Wells [an adviser] has been nothing but great support and helpful.”* This student went on to explain how much support he received from the Choctaw Nation, to include support for textbooks, a laptop, and support for him to travel to a conference that supports his studies.

### Native American Veteran Social Skills

Social Skill is defined as a protective factor that can help someone overcome risk, in that they have the ability to create and maintain relationships that can endure through challenging events (Ponce-Garcia, Madewell, & Kennison, 2015). There were no differences in the self-reported rates of social skills between the Native American and White veteran students. One Native American veteran student who was still active in the National Guard reported, *“I think the veteran’s classes is a good program. Keep the groups smaller and help readily available to ensure that they stay with the program.”* The Native American veteran students and reported that they wanted the cohort courses to continue,

but they did not think that they needed assistance in creating new relationships with other veterans. However, they struggled more developing relationships with their professors.

### **Lower Resilience among Native American Veteran Students**

Among the Native American veteran students who reported lower resilience, they also reported minor or major challenges balancing coursework with other responsibilities. They also reported a major challenge in finding peers or staff who understand your perspective as a veteran. They did not think that professors were able to connect with them nor did they understand professors' academic expectations. Finally, the largest obstacle of interest is that all 10 Native American veteran students reported no interest in tutoring or counseling. In comparison to those who reported moderate to high resilience, they reported no major challenges balancing coursework and more importantly, they reported high satisfaction with the tutoring and counseling services offered by the Native American Student Center, the Nation, and the Student Support Center at the university.

### **Discussion**

The results of this study highlight the importance of investigating and attempting to understand that student veterans represent a special population and that many student veterans have additional benefits and risks that directly affect their ability to matriculate. Our sample of student veterans detailed many significant steps that both administrators and professors could integrate into their current programs to improve matriculation rates for student veterans. Refer to Table 2 on the following page.

TABLE 2

<b>In your view, what could our university do to make it easier for student veterans to be successful on campus and achieve their goals?</b>	
<b>To Administrators:</b>	
1. <i>“Take a closer look at our <b>military transcripts</b>.”</i>	~ 64% of responses
2. <i>“Have <b>more than 1 counselor available</b> to provide more information about what assistance is available... most of us veterans don't know what or where to find assistance.”</i>	~ 37 % of responses
3. <i>“<b>I stop shopping</b> for enrollment, financial aid, scheduling, etc. We all work full time jobs and do not have time for the run around.”</i>	~ 31 % of responses
4. <i>“<b>Child care and tutoring</b> for veterans would be helpful. I was 28 years old when I started back to school. I had to relearn a lot of information and a tutor would have been very helpful.”</i>	~28% of responses
<b>To Professors:</b>	
1. <b>Offer non-traditional course offerings.</b> <i>“More <b>evening and online courses</b>. Most veterans have jobs, family, and bills. To get an education as a traditional students is almost impossible.”</i>	~36% of responses
2. <b>Assist Veterans with transition to civilian life.</b>	~18% of responses
a. <b>Class dynamics</b> <i>“Most of the younger students are so <b>immature</b> it was a major distraction.”</i>	
b. <b>Direct or indirect tutoring</b> - Requested tutoring in math and/or writing	~22% of responses
3. <b>Develop a syllabus statement</b> within your department that allows Veteran’s to feel supported. <i>“<b>Understand</b> when I have temporary military duty and do not give me zeros when I am serving our country!”</i>	~16% of responses

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