Trading Boots for Books: A Psychoeducational Group for Military Veterans Enrolled in Higher Education

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Abstract

More than ten years of armed conflict and educational benefits offered as an incentive to enlistment have produced a small but growing population of veterans attending colleges and universities. These students may feel isolated from peers and underutilize existing transition services. The authors present format and content for a psychoeducational group experience that integrates social support and academic skill building.

Keywords: veterans, groups, transition

For the past decade the United States military has been engaged in the Global War on Terror, and nearly two million members of the armed forces have served in Iraq and Afghanistan. As these service members return from their deployments, an increasing number are choosing to pursue higher education (American Council on Education, 2009). Indeed, some service members choose to enlist in part for the educational benefits offered to veterans (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Garza Mitchell, 2009; Zinger & Cohen, 2010).

The challenges these veterans face in transitioning to university life differ from those faced by their non-military student peers. This small, unique, and growing population currently represents about 4% of undergraduate and graduate students nationwide (Radford, 2011). According to the 2010 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), student veterans are, among other differences, likely to be older than traditional students and more likely to be first-generation college students. One in five student combat veterans reported one or more disabilities, compared to one in ten non-veteran students. Although student veterans spend approximately the same amount of time studying as their non-military peers, veterans spend more hours on other obligations such as paid work or dependent care. Veterans are also less likely to engage in student-faculty interaction and other opportunities for 'higher order' learning (NSSE, 2010).

On college campuses counselors offer a range of services, including groups that address the needs of specific student populations. In psychoeducational groups, members learn new information and develop a better understanding of their own strengths and personal resources. We propose that a psychoeducational group for student veterans would meet several possible needs of this population, including providing opportunities to connect with others who share their experience, proactively addressing the stressors which might impede student veterans' academic success, and serving as a non-threatening, empowering introduction to student support services that this population might otherwise be reluctant to seek out.

Literature Review

Church (2009) discussed three reasons today's veterans are pursuing higher education at an increasing rate. First, the Post 9/11 GI Bill, passed in 2008, increased financial benefits for veterans enrolling in college from the levels previously set by the Montgomery GI Bill, making post-secondary education more affordable. Secondly, many veterans are also eligible for education benefits provided through the Americans with Disabilities Act because of injuries sustained in combat. Finally, the current economic climate makes it difficult for veterans to find employment, particularly in fields that have traditionally hired former service members.

In an analysis of the higher education environment for returning veterans, O'Herrin (2011) reported the student-veteran population is comprised of, "by definition, nontraditional students," (p. 15) and best understood as diverse, rather than homogenized by common military experience. Feedback shared by veterans during roundtables, conferences, focus groups, and interviews indicated that they value support from people who share their military experiences; streamlined communication and points of contact in dealing with university bureaucracy; and collaboration across departments and community organizations that provide comprehensive services and information (O'Herrin, 2011). In addition, O'Herrin found many veterans do not avail themselves of available support programs, particularly in the realm of disability services, and do not use all of their federal education benefits. Radford (2011) reviewed data obtained from 114,000 undergraduates and 14,000 graduates representing 1,700 institutions and found that only two-fifths of military undergraduates used the education benefits granted by the GI Bill.

Danish and Antonides (2009) studied multiple reports produced by the U.S. Army's Military Health Assessment Team, the American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force on Deployment Services, and the Rand Corporation. These reports suggested that veterans experience culture shock as they reintegrate into civilian society and that many, even those with family support, struggle with this transition. Further findings were that service members have often assimilated military cultural values that discourage seeking assistance for mental health concerns because it is considered a sign of weakness. Veterans may also be reluctant to discuss their experiences with civilians who they do not expect to be able to understand military cultural values or their combat experiences (Danish & Antonides, 2009).

Several researchers (Ackerman et al., 2009; Runmann & Hamrick, 2010; Zinger & Cohen, 2010) conducted qualitative studies to examine the experiences of student veterans after deployment. Ackerman et al. interviewed a total of 25 post-deployment veterans who were enrolled at universities (2009). Participants discussed the anger, stress, readjustment issues, and need to relearn study skills that challenge student-veterans. Bureaucratic university procedures were identified as a source of additional stress and confusion (Ackerman et al., 2009). Runmann and Hamrick (2010) interviewed seven individuals who re-enrolled in college after their studies were interrupted by deployments of between 11 and 16 months duration. Through a minimum of two 90-minute interviews they found the transitions of returning to "student" and "civilian" identities were interconnected. The respondents in this study reported elevated stress levels, struggles to connect with younger peers, and sometimes encountered delays in their plans of study. These veterans, however, also reported increased maturity and greater sense of purpose in their studies after deployment. The challenge these veterans faced was the formation of an identity that integrated their military experience into their present student life rather than seeking to return to their pre-deployment identity (Runmann & Hamrick, 2010).

Zinger and Cohen (2010) discussed the impact of deployment on the emotional and

social adjustment of student veterans, including maladaptive coping mechanisms that some of these students adopted to handle their experiences. Ten veterans of combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan participated in structured interviews and reported feeling isolated, struggling to identify with classmates after deployment, and difficulties in personal relationships. Other specific challenges these veterans identified included coping with physical and emotional war wounds, a lack of structure outside the military, and being a target for negative public opinion about war.

Hoge, Castro, Messer, McGurk, Cotting, and Koffman (2004) found that deployment increases the chance of mental health disorders after they surveyed members of four U.S. combat infantry units during pre-deployment phase (n=2530) and four like units in post-deployment (n=3761) using the patient health questionnaire for major depression and anxiety, and the National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Checklist. Tanielian and Jaycox (2008) collected surveys from 1,965 veterans and found that an estimated one-third of previously deployed veterans suffer from PTSD, major depression, or experienced a probable traumatic brain injury (TBI). Those experiencing symptoms of PTSD noted how this made the transition to student life even more challenging (Zinger & Cohen, 2010).

Female veterans face additional challenges. Women make up 14% of today's armed forces, and more than half report experiencing sexual harassment during their service (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2007). Kimerling, Gima, Smith, Street, and Frayne (2007) screened 137, 006 women and 2,925, 615 men at the Veterans Health Administration for Military Sexual Trauma (MST) and found 22% of women reported MST. Kimerling et al. also found that PTSD, dissociative disorders, and personality disorders were strongly correlated with MST.

Burnett and Segoria (2009) reviewed successful collaborative efforts at the institutional, local, state, and federal level and found that student-veterans might not identify themselves as needing additional support for which they qualify, limiting their full participation and integration into collegiate life. Student veterans at the individual level were found to respond best to veteran-to-veteran collaborations, as military culture teaches reliance on the unit for safety and support (Burnett & Segoria, 2009). Taken together, these findings suggest that a group environment may be particularly effective with the student-veteran population.

Preparing a Group for Student Veterans

The proposed curriculum is designed to address common difficulties many veterans encounter in transitioning from military to collegiate life. Based on the literature review, group sessions are structured to address social, academic, and personal challenges student veterans face and allow an opportunity for veterans to address concerns with university faculty and staff.

Forming the Group

Groups should be publicized through a wide variety of outlets in multiple contexts. To recruit veterans it would be advantageous to combine "traditional" on-campus publicity efforts with outreach through community offices and organizations that serve this population. Since the curriculum is developed to support student veterans in transition, it is essential that groups begin as early in the term as possible. Recruiting and screening should be completed within the first two weeks of the term.

Screening

In order to assess individuals' compatibility with the group, a personal pre-group interview of potential members should be conducted. The focus and goals of the group should be explained clearly and any questions answered. The screening interview should include questions about the individual's ranks, jobs, and assignments in the military; number and nature of

deployments; current military status; current student status; and disability status. The counselor conducting the screening interview should be aware that veterans may be more likely and willing to identify themselves as "wounded" than "disabled" and should choose their language accordingly (O'Herrin, 2011). Female veterans should also be asked whether they experienced sexual assault or harassment while in the military.

Additionally, potential members of this group may be experiencing serious cognitive or psychological challenges related to their military service. These veterans may not have sought mental health care or been diagnosed with any particular condition (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008); the screening interview for this group may be their first interaction with mental health services. Given this, it is recommended that the counselor conducting the screening be familiar with symptoms of TBI, PTSD, and depression, which are the three mental health challenges most commonly associated with combat deployment. Although student veterans should not be excluded from a university transition group on the basis of these or other conditions, clinicians should be prepared to provide treatment referrals, if needed.

Leadership

The leader of this group should be able to recognize, above all, that group members will be bridging military and university cultures in addition to each member's personal cultural background. Counselors running groups for the student veteran population should receive training about aspects of military culture, including the distinction between branches of the military, the system of military ranks, and common military acronyms and terms. Facilitators should also familiarize themselves with enlisted education and training systems, and benefits available to veterans (Hall, 2008). Civilian counselors may find it requires perseverance to establish mutually respectful relationships with student veterans and other agencies that serve them (Danish & Antonides, 2009).

Group Format and Content

The proposed curriculum is comprised of eight one-hour sessions over the course of an eight-week period. In the military many student veterans learned to rely on their unit for safety and support (Burnett & Segoria, 2009), so sessions are structured to allow them to support one another. In each session icebreakers could be used to stimulate conversation and deepen personal connections among members. The proposed activities are designed to stimulate thinking and engage members to share personal experiences and perspectives. Table 1 suggests questions for processing each session's activities. The use of homework would prolong the therapeutic effect.

Session one: Introduction

The objectives of this session are to introduce group members to one another, present the format of the group, and discuss ground rules that enhance group functioning to include issues of confidentiality and maintaining respect for each member's experiences. Use of a movement activity may be a good way to facilitate members getting to know each other better in this early stage. For example, designating three areas of the room, the leader would pose scenarios and questions to the group and direct members to different sections of the room based on their answers. In this example, scenarios and questions would be a mix of personal demographic and preference information and followed by processing of the activity in dyads.

Session two: Military culture, civilian culture

This session is intended to help members identify and discuss the differing values of military and university cultures. During this session, group members should be guided in the construction of a model of "culture shock," which is intended to assist in identifying transition issues, defining associated challenges in personal

Table 1
Group Sessions

Session	Suggested Processing Questions
Session 1: Introduction	• What are your reasons for coming to university? • How might this group be beneficial to you? • How are your fellow group members similar to you? How are they different?
Session 2: Military Culture, Civilian Culture	• What has been the biggest difference for you between your life in the military and your life as a student? • How would you describe our university's culture? • To what extent do you identify with the university's culture?
Session 3: Study Skills and Resources	• What are your strengths and weaknesses as a student? • What are some resources that are available to help you improve your study skills? • How comfortable are you seeking academic help?
Session 4: Social Supports	• What topics would you feel comfortable discussing with classmates or professors? • Are there any topics you don't feel comfortable discussing even with close friends or family members?
Session 5: Juggling Responsibilities	• What are some of the responsibilities [outside of academics] in your life? • How do these other responsibilities affect your ability to be a successful student?
Session 6: Stress and Anxiety	• What triggers stress for you? • What do you find relaxing? • How do you cope with stress?
Session 7: Grievances and Successes	• On a scale of 1 to 10, how veteran friendly is our university? • What was it like to talk with university administrators? • How did this discussion change your perceptions of the university?
Session 8: Wrap Up Time	• What was most beneficial about participating in this group? • Where can you find continued support on campus?

terms, and developing plans for using social resources to overcome them. The group leader should be prepared to offer information about a full range of community and university based resources.

Session three: Study skills and resources

The intention of this session is to increase group members' awareness of their own study style, explore strengths and weaknesses of their styles, improve concentration of members, and to present resources available at the university to help with studying. The activity in this session should support improved concentration. For example, members could be given a page with 12 words to study for a short time and then asked to turn over the paper and write as many of the words as possible from memory. During processing in a large group format members could then share different strategies for memorization.

Session four: Social supports

By the end of this session, group members will have identified people who comprise their support network. One activity to assist members in conceptualizing these support networks might involve the use of concentric circles. The innermost circle represents the group member. The group members would then write names of other people that form their network on appropriate rings to indicate how close the individual feels to each person. These social universe pictures could be shared in dyads or triads before processing the issues related to the modification and development of their support networks in a large group.

Session five: Juggling responsibilities

This session is designed to assist members in identifying challenges posed by responsibilities outside of academia and how they might balance "normal life" with academic concerns. A popular activity for groups with goals such as this is to construct pie charts or a "wheel of life" to graphically depict where imbalances occur. Processing would include members offering personal strategies for attaining balance in their lives and additional sources of support.

Session six: Stress and anxiety

The objective for this session is for group members to identify sources of stress and anxiety that may be adversely impacting their educational experience. Potential stressors may include, but are not limited to, academics, family concerns, combat experiences, and reintegration into civilian society. The group leader will facilitate a guided imagery exercise to demonstrate one relaxation technique.

Session seven: Grievances and successes

This session gives participants an opportunity to directly interact with a panel of representatives from their academic institution and provide suggestions for better supporting veterans in joining the university culture. This panel should include members from academic advising departments as well as those from financial aid, student services, public safety, student housing, and veteran's affairs, if the university has such a department. The group leader should be mindful of creating a comfortable environment for potentially difficult discussions.

Session eight: Wrap up time

The goal for this final session is to consolidate lessons learned by group members. The leader should provide group members with the opportunity to provide feedback regarding the group process and encouragement to other group members. A letter writing activity would be ideal for these goals. For example: members might write a short note of encouragement for each member of the group, including themselves. The group leader would collect the notes and mail them to group members before final exams.

Evaluating the Group

The effectiveness of new programs should be

assessed to determine whether they achieve desired outcomes. There are numerous methodologies for evaluating the effectiveness of psychoeducational groups, such as pre-post tests and structured interviews. The method selected for evaluating this new group should focus on the specific skills addressed in the curriculum and account for local contextual factors, such as the size of the campus student veteran population and availability of community resources.

Discussion

This group is aligned with current research on meeting the needs of student veterans, but there are inherent challenges posed by civilians offering services to veterans. Veterans may be reluctant to participate in such groups if they do not feel that group leaders understand their experiences. Becoming familiar with military customs, courtesies, and common terminology is essential for group leaders. Doing so not only prepares the counselor but also conveys respect to potential group members. Such preparation also places the group leader in a position to understand the group members' experiences based on branches of service, specialties, and rank structure. It may not be possible to establish a truly egalitarian relationship between group members given the military rank hierarchy, but stressing commonalities as opposed to highlighting differences would reduce these conflicts. Finally, the fact remains that student veterans underutilize support resources and there is no guarantee that veterans will participate in such a group. Advertising and recruitment efforts should be intentional, focused, sustained, and proactive.

Conclusion

Student veterans are a small, unique campus population, and as their numbers grow, universities will need to offer services specific to this population. Counselors play an essential role in helping these students with adjustment issues (Zinger & Cohen, 2010). The proposed eight-session psychoeducational group curriculum seeks to provide support tailored to the issues known to be relevant to this population: study skills (Student Veterans of America, n.d.); coping with stress (Ackerman et al., 2009; Runmann & Hamrick, 2010; Zinger & Cohen, 2010); work and family responsibilities greater than those of traditional students (NSSE, 2010); culture shock moving between the military and civilian cultures (Danish & Antonides, 2009; Zinger & Cohen, 2010); and isolation on campus (Student Veterans of America, n.d.; Zinger & Cohen, 2010). Members of such groups can assist institutions of higher education in considering better ways to serve student veterans (O'Herrin, 2011). Finally, a group created to provide information that supports veterans' transition to student status also serves as a stigma free gateway for this population to connect with university counseling services.

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