Promoting Veterans in Higher Education: Motivation and Adjustments to Their Learning Environments

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The 21st century higher education for veterans became a reality with the passing of the Post 911 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 (The GI Bill or 9-11 G.I. Bill). As a result, veterans are utilizing their educational benefits and attending colleges and universities throughout the United States of America in preparation of their transition to the civilian workplace. While there are numerous studies that highlight veterans’ experiences in higher education, there is limited studies that focus specifically to their motivation and perceptions of the learning environment. This qualitative study, utilizing focus groups, explored the experience of 11 veterans regarding their motivation to pursue higher education coupled with their perceived difference of the learning environment, military compared to higher education. The results revealed that veterans are motivated to pursue higher education and there is a perceive difference in the learning environment. As a result of the findings, some strategies were provided for adult educators with responsibility for teaching veterans.

Key words: veterans, higher education, military, motivation, learning environment, nontraditional learners

INTRODUCTION

According to the Veterans Benefits Administration (2012), approximately 945,000 students throughout the United States of American utilize education benefits from the Department of Veteran Affairs. The privilege to obtain higher education became a reality for veterans with the passing of the Post 911 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 (The GI Bill or 9-11 G.I. Bill). However, unlike the conventional nontraditional student, veterans, a unique student population, is equipped with added layers of life experiences and challenges such as: adaptation from military culture to civilian culture (Evans, Peliegrino, & Hoggan; 2015), navigating the governmental and institutional bureaucracies (Rumann et al., 2011; Wheeler, 2012), service related disabilities: psychological and physical (DiRamio & Spires, 2009; Church, 2009; Strickley;2009), that makes navigating higher education more challenging and often results in them being alienated and misunderstood by the general student population. Nonetheless, despite the added layers to the journey of pursuing higher education, these veterans evidently are motivated and their presence is recognized throughout many colleges and universities in the United States.

While motivation is essential to success, there has been some concerns with regards to the veterans’ academic performance in comparison to the civilian (Durdella & Kim, 2012). There is an underlying question of whether this a reflection on the student or is there a connection between motivation and the pedagogical/andragogical approach used by instructors (Pew, 2007). In addition to the added layers of life experiences and challenges, are the veteran students now required to recondition their process of learning and expectation of the learning environment? Is there is a paradigm shift in their roles as student? On this premise, this study was conducted with two overall objectives. First to explore motivational factors that influenced veterans to pursue higher education after leaving the military. Second, to explore veterans’ perceived difference in the learning environment, military compared to higher education, and its influence on their roles as students. The study also ventures to provide some strategies and best practices to be considered by adult educators with responsibility for facilitating learning of veterans with the view of promoting a veteran friendly learning and institutional environment.
This study is essential because it is intended to address the academic gap in the literature regarding veterans in higher education compared to other essential service men and women. While there are some studies that are conducted on veterans in higher education (Brown, 2009; Fiore & Da Silveira, 2010; Kasworm, 2005; Mangan, 2009; Murphy, 2014; Senk 2015) it is not from a learning perspective or examines the learning environment as an influential factor on veterans adaptation to higher education and/or comparing the learning environment in the military to that of higher education. Instead, the more recent studies speak to the physical, health psychological challenges of veterans in higher education (Elliott, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2011; Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2013). Furthermore, there has been an influx of veterans to higher education. It is imperative, as educators and institutions of higher learning, to be aware of veterans’ perceptions of the learning environment, how it differs from what they traditionally perceived as a learning environment, based on their military experience, and utilize this information as a tool to better serve, assist with increasing the retention and success rate of the veteran student. There are even fewer studies with a focal point on veterans’ motivation and perceived difference in learning environments, military compared to higher education, and related challenges. The theoretical framework that acts as the lens to illuminate this study is andragogy and pedagogy. This framework is utilized because it provides a clear depiction of the learning environment which reflects the behaviorism theory (military) and adult learning theory (higher education). The research questions that guide this research are:

1. What motivational factors influence veterans to pursue higher education after leaving the military?
2. How veterans describe their learning environment in the military compared to higher education and its impact on their roles as students?

STUDY BACKGROUND

Veterans the Unconventional Nontraditional Learner

There are varying definitions but a common thread that links the definition of nontraditional learner and supporting characteristics. There is a general consensus that the nontraditional learner is certainly students returning to school for a number of reasons such as to pursue an advanced degree, to finish a degree started earlier in life, or to stay current and competitive in the business world (Luzzo, 1999). According to Knowles (1980), the nontraditional adult learner is often profiled as an individual who is over the age of 25 years, fully employed, enrolled part-time within higher education, has family responsibilities, and has not pursued higher education immediately after completing high school. Bean and Metzner (1985) indicated that the term non-traditional student is not precisely and consistently defined but still echoes the sentiments of Knowles (1980) defining the nontraditional learner as age (usually 25+ years) and part-time status are common defining characteristics. While age, and enrollment status are referenced as a defining characteristic of the nontraditional learner, Compton, Cox, and Laanan (2006) eluded that adult students are often referred to as nontraditional students and/or learners, yet not all nontraditional students are adult students which adds another layer of complexity regarding who are considered nontraditional learners. Horn (1996) supports Knowles (1980) and Bean and Metzner, (1985) definition of the nontraditional learner but added the component of financial independence and deferred enrollment. In addition, Horn (1996) expands stating that students who have dependents, are single parents, and did not receive standard high school diplomas are considered nontraditional students. Such individuals are often over the age of 25 years (Jinkens, 2009). Regarding characteristics of the nontraditional learner, Knowles (1980) identify unique characteristics associated with the nontraditional learner which include: autonomous and self-directed, possessing an accumulated foundation of experiences and knowledge, goal-oriented, relevancy oriented, practical, and needing respect.

According to Murphy (2014), the veteran is considered a unique nontraditional learner. While some of the defining characteristics of the nontraditional learner are applicable to the veteran student, these individuals are equipped with unique experiences associated with the military, cultural difference (adjustment from the military world to the civilian world), and identity negotiations that do not exist with the conventional nontraditional student.

While it is noted that there exist some challenges for the nontraditional learner in higher education (Hunter-Johnson, 2017), the veteran student challenges evidently far exceed the conventional nontraditional student. Kasworm (2005) study reported adult learners (veterans) experiencing changing student identities influenced by a complex array of factors and structures in the classroom as well as their own self-construction of college student behaviors based on their own dynamic adult role life experiences. In addition, regarding combat veterans, factors such as their own life experiences in the military and combat could have a profound influence on what may be active identity negotiation by these students while on campus or in the classroom.

Five challenges that veterans experience in higher education were revealed by Herrmann, Raybeck, and Wilson (2008). They include: (1) transferring of credits, (2) expenses and benefit counseling, (3) health services, (4) the failure of the school to meet their academic needs, and (5) an uncomfortable classroom climate. Fiore and Da Silveira (2010) indicated that veterans have had a negative experience in higher education specifically the classroom,
approximately 26%. This could be contributed to the fact that most veterans approximately 90% did not request the assistance of their professors when there was a need regarding class related assignments. According to Murphy (2014), this is as a result of an underlying problem between veterans and the college instructors who are in charge of the classrooms. Murphy further expanded that, “since instructional communication scholars have consistently identified communication as an important variable in the instructor-student relationship, communication scholars are uniquely positioned to address this problem” (p. 5). The resistance to effectively communicate educational concerns and needs in the learning environment can be as a result of the cultural difference in the learning environment (military compared to higher education). Raybeck (2010) echoes this tension by highlighting the inherent cultural differences between military life and academia. He explains that the educational environment in higher education can be strange for veterans which can lend to much uncertainties regarding the nature of present expectations and acceptable, even approved behavior. However, despite the challenges encountered, the veteran student is more mature and motivated in their studies (Brown, 2009; Brown & Gross, 2011; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Herrmann, Raybeck, & Roland, 2008; Mangan, 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

Senk (2015) explored the female veteran students balancing the transition to college. The findings from this study revealed that although the females were motivated, they still encountered challenges with the transition to college. Such challenges included difficulties in adjusting to civilian life, returning to school, and being a parent (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Additionally, it was revealed that the female veteran students who choose to return for their education face specific issues in the academic milieu. Many feel invisible, unheard, or isolated in the classroom, unable to connect with other students who tend to be younger and lack life experiences or complain about little things (Foster & Vince, 2009).

Veterans’ Motivation to Pursue Higher Education

“Motivation has been defined as the level of effort an individual is willing to expend toward the achievement of a certain goal” (Brennen, 2006, p. 4). Motivation specifically regarding students incorporates both philosophical and practical disciplines and offers multiple findings and recommendations for best practices while grounded in theories of motivation such as behavioral, cognitive, humanistic, and biological viewpoints (Pew, 2007). However, specific to the field of education, there has been a vast amount of literature with a focal point on adult learners, in particular, nontraditional learners and their motivation to pursue higher education. Among the pioneers in the field of adult education are Houle (1961), Boshier (1973), Tinto (1975), Cross (1981), Darkenwald and Merriam (1982), Lieb (1991), McClellan (2001), who have identified key motivational factors that influence adult learners. These factors may vary depending on the research group; however, there are many commonalities of the adult learners.

Houle (1961) focused on the reasons adults pursue learning activities. He identified three types of learners that he labeled goal-oriented, activity-oriented, and learning-oriented. The separation of the subgroups was determined by motivation and influences. Boshier (1971) utilizing Houle (1961) work as an underpinning, constructed the Education Participation Scale (EPS) predicated on these two-researcher’s body of knowledge. This instrument was then utilized to further test Houle typology. One essential distinction between Boshier (1971) and Houle (1961) classic study is that Houle’s work focused on grouping people while Boshier’s work concentrated on understanding motivation and/or reasons for adults to pursue higher education. Utilizing Houle’s 1961 model, Boshier (1971) formulated the 48-item EPS, which identified six factors of motivation for adults who pursued higher educational programs. They include: social welfare, social contact influences, other directed professional advancements, the intellectual recreation, an inner drive for professional advancement, and social conformity.

Lieb (1991) describes six factors that serve as a source of motivation for adults: social relationships, external expectations, social welfare, personal advancement, escape/stimulation, and cognitive interest. Swain and Hammond (2011) identified that significant others had an influence on the individual’s decisions and performance in both a negative and positive way.

In more recent years, there has been an increased in the literature that focus on adults, in particular, nontraditional students, motivation to pursue higher education (Chu, Hsieh, & Chang, 2007; Jinkens, 2009; Hunter-Johnson, 2017; McClellan, 2001). However, there is limited academic literature that focus on veterans’ motivation to pursue higher education. Among the few, Patterson and Paulson (2016) indicated that job-related reasons as a critical motivational factor regarding pursuing higher education “job or career enhancement and job stability” (p. 13). Brauchle (1997) argued that primary reasons of learning for veteran students were career enhancement and increasing career opportunities after retirement. In the current workplace, job stability implies not only maintaining and promoting within one organization but also getting a position with higher requirements in knowledge and skills, so adults learn to ensure the job stability (Patterson & Paulson, 2016). In addition, the expectation of getting promotion faster or higher income is also the motivations of veterans to pursue education (Brown, 1993). Diverse personal reasons also can be the motivations for adult learning. Hansman and Mott (2010) has shown evidence that adult learners could gain self-worth and self-esteem
through learning. Veterans with mental health diagnoses, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and cognitive disorders, could receive mental health and social work service and overcome their health problems while in college (McCaslin, Leach, Herbst, & Armstrong, 2013). Moreover, Vacchi (2012) noted that education benefits, such as the Post 9-11 GI Bill, are attractively to motivate veterans to pursue as degree in higher education.

**Andragogical Approach**

Knowles define the term andragogy as, "the art and science of helping adults learn" (Knowles, 1984, p. 6). The term andragogy although synonymous with Malcolm Knowles in the United States of America, was originally coined by Alexander Knapp (1833) a German school teacher. According to Henschke (2011) the term was later adapted by Rosenstock-Huessy (1925), another German who utilized and further developed it as a teaching method after World War II for the Germans. It was not until the early 1900’s that Lindeman (1926) introduced the term to the United States. The term andragogy was later adapted by Malcolm Knowles in 1966 (Sopher, 2003). Knowles as an educator, who believed that the purpose of education was to enable people to develop a skillset to engage in continuously learning (Knowles 1975), supplemented the term using his experience in adult education as an underpinning to focus on the role of the student and the teacher. The concept of andragogy includes two key assumptions: first, “a conception of the learners as self-directed and autonomous and second, the conception of the role of the teacher as a facilitator of learning rather than a presenter of content” (Pratt & Associates 1998, 2). Pratt (1988) further explains that andragogy as “(a) a set of assumptions about adults as learners and (b) a series of recommendation for the planning, management and evaluation of adult learning” (p.160). Reischmann (2004) defines andragogy as the ‘science of understanding (theory) and supporting (practice) lifelong and life wide education of adults’ (p.1)

The term andragogy and its approach to teaching and learning differs greatly from that of pedagogical approach. A crucial component of adult learning theory is based on Knowles (1990) theory of andragogy. Knowles (1980) utilizing individual’s maturity as an underpinning developed four assumptions unique to the andragogical orientation. These assumptions can also be viewed as being a determinant or influential factor on the educational orientation of adult learners. As individuals mature:

1. their self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality towards being a self-directed human being,
2. they accumulate a growing reservoir or experience that becomes an increasingly rich resource for learning,
3. their readiness to learn becomes oriented towards the developmental task of their social role and
4. their time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application and accordingly their orientation towards learning shifts from one of subject-centredness to one of performance centredness (44–5).

Within a higher education setting, the learning environment which is reflective of andragogy is one where there is a switch in the role of learner from a passive recipient of learning to an active participant of learner. The instructional method utilized by the instructor is one that is focus more on the facilitation of learning while incorporating the experiences of the learner as a foundational platform for learning. According to Dailey (1984), the atmosphere is one that is relaxed, trusting, there is mutual respect (professor/student), informal, collaborative and supportive. With regards to leadership, innovation and creativity is encouraged, there is a level of interdependence and maturity, mentoring and modeling is encouraged. Regarding communication, there is a mutual two-way communication between the instructor and student, high level of respect for both student and instructor and while fostering a level of support.

**Pedagogical Approach**

Pedagogy is defined as ‘the art and science of teaching children’ (Knowles 1980, 40). Contrary to andragogy which can be classified as more student focus, pedagogy embodies teacher focus education (Conner, 2005). The teacher is considered to be the authority with full responsibility for the teacher student transaction which is more teacher centered. The learner, unlike with andragogy, is dependent on the teacher with regards to what should be learned, the manner in which it is learned, when, how and if learning should occur. Unlike andragogy, the role of the learner is to be a passive recipient of the teacher’s instruction (Knowles, 1980, p. 48). The pedagogical approach is most common in law enforcement (para military) and military learning environments. Although an opponent to andragogy, the pedagogical approach like behaviorism approach have been said to be effective in para military and military training specific to task or skills-based training. Contrary, Birzer and Tannehill (2001) whose focus is paramilitary organization, indicated that “police academies that use pedagogical approaches foster an environment in which the focus becomes the chain of command, rules, regulation, and policy and procedures” (p. 239). However, this is also applicable in a military setting where more emphasis is on discipline, chain of command and bureaucracy compared to law enforcement. Dailey explained that the quality of learning that takes places in an organization is affected by the kind of organization it is. Further, “in a bureaucratic organization where the pedagogical model is dominant, the quality of learning for adults is highly questionable” (1984, p. 66). Within a learning environment that incorporates andlor is reflective
of the pedagogical approach, instructional methods which are influenced by the behaviorism theory are reflective of lecture style, rote memorization, drills and quizzes. Emphasis is also placed on punishment and reward. According to Elias and Merriam (2005), "no other system of psychology has had as much impact on general and adult education, or had its principles be the cause of as much debate, as behaviorism" (p.83). While this approach is most common in para military and military organization, specifically as it relates to accountability, technical and practical training, and empowering teachers and learners through competency-based education (Elias & Merriam, 2005). However, there are some opponents who argue that behaviorism approach is more appropriate in some subjects and types of learning situations than others.

METHODS

Study Design

A qualitative study was employed in this study utilizing focus groups. Creswell (2007) describes the qualitative approach as the best approach whereby the purpose of the study is exploratory. In addition, Krueger and Casey (2009) provided insight with regards to focus groups as a special group with a common purpose, composition and procedures to be adhered. Additionally, the overall objective of a focus group is to listen and gather information with an objective to better understand how people think and feel about a particular issue, product or service. Taking this into consideration, coupled with the overall objective of the study, was the motivation to adopt this approach.

Participants

The focus group session consisted of participants \((n = 11)\) from different branches of the armed forces which included Military, Navy, Marine, Coast Guard, Army and Airforce with a variation of years’ service. The age range of the participants were 20 to 60 and included undergraduates and graduate students across the discipline Education, Business, Humanities and Human Services. There was great diversity with regards to the focus group participants \((n = 4 \text{ males and } n = 7 \text{ females})\).

The inclusion criteria for the participants were: both genders, pre and post 911 veterans, and participants must currently be enrolled in an institution of higher education pursuing an academic degree. Participants were informed of their rights not to participate in this study in compliance with the Institutional Review Board. See Table 1 Participants' Demographic.

| Table 1. Participants' Demographic Information |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | n | % |
| Gender | | |
| Male | 7 | 26 |
| Female | 4 | 74 |
| 21-30 | 4 | 36 |
| 31-40 | 3 | 27 |
| 41-50 | 2 | 18 |
| 51-60 | 2 | 18 |
| Highest Educational | | |
| High School | 4 | 36 |
| Associates | 4 | 36 |
| Bachelors | 1 | 9 |
| Masters | 1 | 9 |
| Other | 1 | 9 |
| Program of Study | | |
| Education | 5 | 45 |
| Business | 1 | 9 |
| Computer Science | 1 | 9 |
| Humanities (Arts) | 1 | 9 |
| Human Services | 1 | 9 |
| Physiology | 1 | 9 |
| Science | 1 | 9 |
| Branch of Military | | |
| Army | 4 | 36 |
| Marine | 2 | 18 |
| Airforce | 4 | 36 |
| Coast Guard | 1 | 9 |

Note. \(N=11\)

Data Collection and Analysis

There were three focus groups conducted within a classroom setting at a large Midwestern university between Summer and Fall 2016. Each focus group session had approximately three to four participants. Participants for the focus group were solicited utilizing the listserv from the Veterans’ Affairs Office. Boeije (2010) describes purposeful sampling as, “intentionally selecting participants according to the needs of the study. These participants can teach us a lot about the issues that are of importance to the research (p.35).” On this premise, purposeful sampling was selected for this study. Prospective participants were provided detailed information about the overall objective of the study, criteria for the study, study procedures, and proposed benefits of the study. If the prospective participants were interested in participating, they were advised to contact the primary researcher of the study. Prospective participants were also given the option to “opt out” of future emails. Recruitment emails were sent on two-week intervals.

When utilizing focus groups, it is imperative that the session is carefully planned with the view of obtaining participants’ perception of the area being discussed in a permissive, non-threatening environment to ensure participants enjoy the information that is being shared (Krueger & Casey 2009). Taking this under advisement, participants were informed of the purpose and procedures of the focus groups in a welcome script. They were reassured that there were no wrong answers and it was imperative that respect be given to all participants. All participants were assigned a number rather than use of their names to ensure anonymity.
Questions were crafted reflective of the study’s objective and guiding research questions with a focus on veteran’s motivation to pursue higher education coupled perceived difference in learning environment, military compared to higher education. The focus group guiding questions were the accelerant that ignited much thought provoking discussions between the study participants during the focus groups which lasted approximately 90 minutes. The focus groups were recorded and transcribed immediately after each session. Additional notes were taken by the researcher during each session to ensure accuracy. Data was reflective of transcripts and notes and was analyzed using open coding, a method of qualitative analysis used with a focal point of establishing themes and main concepts coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Themes and subthemes were identified from the transcripts which reflected the research objectives, research questions and theoretical framework which contributed to a greater understanding and explanation of the issues being studied. As validity and reliability is of utmost importance, an independent peer reviewer assisted by reading through the transcriptions confirming themes and categories which corresponded with the research questions.

**Findings**

**Motivational Factors to Pursue Higher Education**

The study’s finding revealed that veterans were extremely motivated to pursue higher education after serving in the military and it was a general consensus that unexpected challenges would be a passenger in this journey of completing higher education. Regarding veterans’ motivation to pursue higher education, four major themes emerged: (a) self-improvement, (b) career change, (c) obtain a degree/experience college, and (d) financial gain.

**Self-improvement.** The participants of this study agreed harmoniously that formalize education, whether at an undergraduate or graduate level, was imperative to self-improvement. There was much discussion regarding self-improvement and the conceptualization of it. A young male undergraduate veteran eluded that, “I just wanted more…to see that there was something else out there that I was better at (career) and that I preferred… and explore what other options I had”. It was paramount that improving oneself academically would be crucial to achieving this goal. An older male veteran indicated that his motivation for pursuing higher education was, “just personal growth”. Because of his desire to learn continuously, he was confident that pursuing higher education after the military would improve him as an individual and hence his quality of life. “My number one thing was personal growth…I just like to learn…so I figured college would be a good place to do that”. Another participant indicated that the idea of obtaining higher education was something he did not initially give much thought to after leaving the military. It wasn’t until much discussion with family and friends whom he suspects of “playing the devil’s advocate” and just picked his brain about what he was now going to do with his life, he realized that society now functions differently from when he initially enrolled in the military. It would only be self-improvement initiatives such as formalized education that he would now be able to function effectively and really be competitive. Hence, the need to improve oneself. Although initially timid of the idea of returning to school, the opportunity was embraced as it was essential to improve one’s self with the end point of ensuring competitiveness.

**Career change.** The decision to transition from the military, despite the length of time enlisted, to the civilian world is a decision that warrants much emotions, strategic planning and consultation whether with family, spouses, friends or mentors by service men/women. As described by the participants of this study, outside the military is “a different world…a civilian world”. This world is unlike the military that has a unique culture, systems, beliefs and traditions that vastly differs specifically to their work, work ethics, training and career paths. Despite initially being birth and raised in this civilian world, after undergoing rigid training exercises, life experiences and exposures unique to the military work environment, the military world is one they have come to recognize as a world that is unique to them which replicates a brotherhood with a culture, practices, and by extension a communication (language/jargons) unique to that world. The average day within this unique workplace ranges from being shot at or shooting an enemy, strategic planning to ensure the safety of their country, voluntarily leaving love ones behind to travel to a strange country without any confirmation of whether they would return and/or the condition under which they would return. Despite this work environment that may seem unorthodox to the average person, the veterans expressed their passion, appreciation and extreme dedication to this work environment which subsequently requires much discipline, respect for authority and ability to take orders. Hence the transition to the civilian world, specifically the workplace, requires much adjustment as there is much question and concern regarding discipline, respect, dedication and communication. A middle age male veteran eluded to the fact that higher education is being used as “a buffer in preparation of the real world… if I learn how to act around civilians in my classes, then I will know how to act around civilians in the workplace”. A younger male veteran explained that going to school is currently his job in preparation for his career. He explained that this was like no job he has had in the military, he is being paid to learn and then transition into his career of choice. A younger female veteran explained that although she would have received a vast amount of training in the military that resulted in her specializing in the medical field, unique to the military and upward mobility professionally, those skills are not comparable and recognized outside of the military.
Hence, she is now required to be enrolled in higher education to pursue a career in the "civilian world" that replicates her career in the military. Sadly, her training received in the military is not valued, comprehended and able to be equated to the necessary skillset needed in the civilian world by employers.

**Obtain a degree/experience college.** It was a general consensus by the participants of the focus group that it was imperative to receive a college education and by extension a degree whether undergraduate or graduate after leaving the military. The participants explained that such an opportunity exist because of the G.I. Bill. This afforded the veterans the opportunity to enroll in a college of their choice without the financial burden. Despite recognizing the need for higher education, one participant was quite blatant and explained that he enrolled in college because he was bored and wanted something to do after leaving the military. He explained, “I was bored and put of college education for twenty-two years”. Hence, he enrolled in college. Despite the challenges he is encountering, he has no regrets for his decision to receive higher education. It was also discussed that being enrolled in higher education and obtaining a degree will be an opportunity for employers in the civilian world to recognize the skillset and ability they possess. Without a degree, employers in the civilian world have no understanding and appreciation of the certifications and qualifications obtained while enlisted in the military.

**Financial gain.** In most instances, the desire for financial gain is usually perceived as the first option or motivating factor in decision making. However, in this particular study, financial gain was out ranked by factors such as self-improvement, career change, and obtain a degree/experience college with regards to motivating factors to pursue higher education after the military. Despite the military in most instances being the sole source of income for the participants of this study, it was paramount that they received another source of income utilizing higher education as this vehicle but it was not the initial motivation for pursuing higher education. Rather, it was discussed as being essential to ensure that they received an equally or better paying job, it was paramount that they obtain a degree whether graduate or undergraduate to ensure financial gain hence financial stability.

**Perceived Difference in Learning Environments**

The participants of this study revealed that there was a major difference in the learning environment of the military compared to higher education and required a lot of adjustment by them. The major themes that emerged were: (a) passive vs. active student role, (b) pace of learning (c) embracing difference with the instructor’s role and learning environment, (d) individualism vs. collectivism.

**Passive vs. active student role.** The learning environment in the military, is guided by the behaviorism theory coupled with the pedagogical approach, which highlights student’s role as being a passive participant of learning. The student’s role is further compounded by the military organizational culture which is one that echoes discipline, rewards and punishment, bureaucracy, and standardization. However, in institutions of higher education, in most instances, there is a vast expectation regarding the learners’ role. The learners are required to adopt a more active role in the learning environment and ownership regarding their education. There is also an underlying assumption that students would participate in class discussions and creative works utilizing their past experiences as an underpinning and would take responsibility for their educational goals while being self-directed learners.

The participants of this study expressed that enrollment in higher education was a unique experience for them as the learning environment did not reflect anything familiar to them. “Everything was just different”. Added obligations of trenching their education path and educational goals created an additional layer of negativity to this experience. A young male veteran pursuing his bachelor’s degree explained that, “Plotting my own educational path… unlike the military was different….I am now responsible for crafting my own education goals”. A young female veteran who received a vast amount of training in the medical field in the military supported this statement stating when receiving training in the military, “You were told what to do… this is what you’re going to do, this is what you are going to learn and that was the end of the discussion. Either you did it or didn’t.” While she indicated that this was a great challenge for her initially, she became motivated and expected it particularly as she reflected on the quality student she was in high school. The constant threat if she did not perform at an expected level motivated her to excel in any learning environment in the military. However, in higher education, the veterans expressed that there is a free will to select any discipline utilizing your interest as a motivational factor and ether obtain a certificate or degree regardless of the level, and randomly switch between programs. Further the only consequence is a letter grade.

**Pace of learning.** When taking into consideration the overall objectives and scope of training within the military, there is a true appreciation as to why the pace of learning in the training/learning environment is so fast. Additionally, the overall training period is much shorter as learner turnover is essential in the training environment in the military. Training can range from one day to a few months dependent upon the type of training. However, within higher education, to obtain the lowest level degree (Associate’s Degree) the student is expected to be in that learning environment for approximately two years and in some instances longer. In addition, to be awarded this
degree, the educational program is a compilation of various courses approximately three to four months long depending on the institution where the student is enrolled. When comparing the pace of learning in the military to higher education, the participants expressed that there was a vast difference. The pace of learning was extremely fast in the military. The opportunity did not exist for you to “get along” with your instructor… you know you sit in a class all day and listen to your instructor and then you study all night”. However, in higher education, this is relatively new for veterans to experience instructors providing them with all forms of contact information i.e. email, telephone number, particularly cell, assigned office hours for discussion and clarification if you had a question or a problem. Further, the opportunity exists to build an academic relationship with your professors.

**Embracing difference with the instructor’s role and learning environment.** Within the military and par military organizations’ training environment, the role of the instructor adheres to the pedagogical approach of the teacher as the authority figure and in the military this authority extends beyond wealth of knowledge but includes the individual who has the authority to administer punishment with regards to learning. Further, learners are expected to assume the passive role and instructional methods often mimics, lecture styles, quizzes, rote memorization and rewards and punishment in the learning environment. Additional to this approach, training also extends to include demonstrations and on the job training. However, the common themes among these approaches to instructions is the pedagogical approach. Within higher education, the role of the instructor differs vastly and is guided by the andragogical approach which also stems from humanism. Hence a vast difference from training and learning in the military compared to higher education with regards to the role of the instructor. While in higher education, the instructors are perceived as being equipped with a wealth of knowledge, they are not viewed as the authority figure in the class with regards to administration of punishment for learning. Further, it is a common practice for the instructional methods to vary from the lecture style to more of facilitated discussion and much more.

There was much thought provoking and concerning discussion regarding the instructor’s role in higher education which required a major adjustment on behalf of the participants. As the instructor is perceived as the authority figure in the learning environment equipped with a wealth of knowledge and whose role is to impart this knowledge to the learners, it was very concerning for one of the participants to witness an instructor asking the students opinion on a topic, the approach to learning and assignments. A young male veteran pursuing his bachelor’s degree provided an example, “Instructors asking students their opinion, if it’s ok with them [students] is something completely new to me…. I was uncertain why the instructors would do that… this is your class… what do you mean if it is ok with me especially regarding assignments?” From a veteran’s perspective, this instructor was not asserting or assuming his role as an authority figure. It also resulted in unmentioned questions, in the learning environment, regarding the competency of this instructor who has to consult with students.

Further with regards to the instructor’s wealth of knowledge, there was much concern regarding receiving instructions from graduate/research assistants who in the opinion of the veteran student is not as knowledgeable as the actual professor for the course and not a true reflection of an authority figure. A male veteran graduate student stated, “In the military, the instructor has to know the material he/she is teaching to the class. However, in higher education, learners are exposed to graduate teaching assistants who may only be privy to 50% or 75% of the knowledge required for a particular course”. He further explained, “There is another scenario where the instructors read of the slides for 50 minutes and then students are required to research additional material outside the learning environment to compliment what was taught in the classroom environment. This is a completely different approach from the military”. This approach created a culture shock for the veteran students in this learning environment and in some instances potentially became a learning barrier to the veteran students. One participant indicated that in the military, they have become accustomed to instructors approaching the learning environment stating,

*Here is what I’m going to teach you. Here is how to do it. Now you do it. Upon completion, if you as the learner did not complete the task correctly, the instructor would correct you based on what was done wrong and they will tell you what was done right. Also, there may be some physical exercise associated if you do not get it right.*

Another issue of concern regarding instructors that required a major adjustment on behalf of the veteran learners was lack of classroom management skills exhibited by the instructors which extended to include lack of respect, leniency regarding assignments, lack of structure, and consequences. A female graduate veteran indicated that it was extremely disturbing to her the fact that instructors “go so easy on students”. She indicated that there are no consequences in place. She further explained that, “In the military they [instructors] say you have to provide me this project by this date then you go home, do it and bring it back to them. You go home and burn the midnight oil, you do what you got to do and you walk in there and you are the first person to lay on their [instructors] desk and half of the class did not complete the assignment”. She further explained to add to her frustration, the instructors would merely change the assignment submission date to appease the civilians who did not submit their assignment on the required deadline. She explained that this is extremely frustrating for veterans especially considering their militant background which
extends to any learning environment. Another male participant chimed in stating that there is a lack of accountability in higher education with regards to students compared to the learning environment in the military. An older male participant who spoke with much disbelief explained that “in the civilian world, you can get away with a lot more, if you don’t have something done when you’re supposed to have it done, uh a lot of time you can talk your way out of it”. He explained in the military by comparison, “if they [instructors] tell you they want it a certain time, you need to, there is a reason for it and if you don’t get it done...there is going to be some kind of punishment. There is generally a consequence for not taking care of responsibilities or whatever you’re doing”. It was a general consensus that the instructors lower the standards for the students rather than holding a high standard and expecting the students to meet it. It was a general consensus that this was a disservice to the students, veterans or civilians.

**Individualism vs. Collectivism.** Within the military, much emphasis is placed on the training environment being reflective of the importance of working together as a team, team building exercises, being awarded and receiving consequences as team. However, in higher education, there is an immense difference and emphasis is placed on individual learning. There was much discussion with regards to the learning environment in higher education being “difficult to fit in with the other students” and hence veterans often work alone and do not interact with the civilian learners. This discussion was further compounded when veterans discussed that there are many stereotypes associated with being a veteran by the civilians. An older veteran who is also married to a veteran in higher education indicated that, “most civilians think that all veterans have PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) …and that is not the case”. The veterans explained that this makes it extremely difficult to network in this learning environment, whether it is making friends or completing group assignments or even discussions in class. The veterans agreed that as a strategy to be successful and try to mimic that feeling of collectivism in the military while in higher education, they support each other in class. An older male veteran indicated that “Sometimes they [veterans] cluster in a corner and sometimes they spread out. They would have discussions among themselves more rather than with the younger civilians”. Another participant indicated that in higher education it is difficult to make friends or network with the civilians. He stated, “…it is challenging making friends with the civilian students, particularly because of age difference and experiences. The civilians do not understand half the stuff that veterans have to go through”. Hence this uncommon culture makes it difficult to connect. Further, the maturity level, lack of respect for self and others and unorthodox behaviors in class (use of cell phones, playing games on their computers, talking while the instructor is teaching etc.) of the civilian students in higher education creates a greater challenge for them to fit in and be accepted. A middle age participant indicated that “…it is hard to restrain yourself sometimes, because you know in the military when things or when people act a certain way, there are always consequences. Someone will care if someone is acting belligerent”. Another veteran compared their experience in higher education and how they “stand out” to the movie with Billy Madison where an adult had to matriculate the k-12 educational system. There is almost no possible way to fit in with the civilian students.

The veterans within the focus group also had an in-depth discussion about the learning environment and how they had great appreciation for the team concept with regards to training and learning in the military. A middle age female reflected that, “In most instances, we receive specialized learning while in the military and would often have to travel to another state and in some instances international to receive this training, whether for a few weeks or a few months. In addition, such training was done as a platoon/ cohort approach”. An older veteran supported this statement and indicated that while there are some who may perceive this as a negative… eventually you get use to it and you start to like it because you get to see new places, new things, and train together creating a bond while learning like no other…”. However, in higher education, you are at a set location to receive higher education whether for two years at a community college or four years at a university. The end product which is a professional degree requires a longer period of time, but there is a feeling of isolation and learning is on your own. He concluded and stated with grief that in higher education they [administrators, faculty and staff] perceive this as a benefit to veterans”.

While the veterans maintain that they are motivated to be in higher education, there are some major differences compared to the learning environment in the military that require them to adjust. However, it was a general consensus that despite the difference and adjustment required, they would remain in higher education. A male participant concluded this section of the focus group with a compelling statement on behalf of the veterans.

He stated, “We’ve come from either losing our jobs, or someone lost their spouse and now they can’t be a stay at home mother anymore. And I’m coming from the military and it’s a whole different change in life, so you can find the similarities there. We approach it from this point that, this is something we need. This is something that will make life better. This is something that we can’t screw around on because we have only X amount of time to fulfill this and complete this because we’re not going to get a chance again. This is it for most of us...For me, and other nontraditional students, we’re at a different point in our lives. You know, this is it. We have to give it everything we have. There is no exception to the rules”.

*Promoting Veterans in Higher Education: Motivation and Adjustments to Their Learning Environments*
DISCUSSION

The predominant themes that were revealed regarding veteran’s motivation to pursue higher education were compatible with those discussed in previous studies specific to nontraditional learner’s motivation (Bosshier, 1971; Houle, 1961; Hunter-Johnson, 2017; Lieb, 1991; McClellan, 2001). Literature specific to veteran’s motivation, although limited, revealed job-related reasons and job stability (Patterson & Paulson; 2016), career enhancement and increasing career opportunities after retirement (Brauchle; 1997), promotion (Brown, 1993), diverse personal reasons (Hansman & Mott; 2010), and opportunity to receive mental health and social work service (McCaslin, et al., 2013).

Although the findings related to motivations to pursue higher education is not new, nor surprising, (self-improvement, career change, obtain a degree/experience college, and financial gain), within this study, it revealed evidence through the lens of veterans an underrepresented perspective in the literature. In addition, it also speaks to different psychological and sociological layers that attaches itself to the veteran that the conventional nontraditional student would not necessarily experience, although motivated, in pursuit of higher education. For example, career change was identified in the literature as a motivational factor for the nontraditional learner to pursue higher education likewise for the veteran. However, career change from a veteran’s perspective, in this study, while a motivating factor, presents a unique layer for the veteran. It entails much more than transitioning from one job to another. But transitioning between what is perceived as different worlds by the veterans for this career change: “military world” to “the civilian world”. Further, while considering such motivational factors, veterans are required to consider the following to be accepted and properly acclimated in the civilian world and by extension higher education: Change in how they think, behave, describe their duties, their lifestyle, how they interact with others, self-image, who manages their time, level of power and authority, work environments and their income and benefit level (Gaither, 2014). The amount of time difference between discharge and entry to college/university would also impact the extent to which these changes have to be made.

As it relates to the concept of experiencing college as a motivational factor, while in most instances there is the assumption of just completing a degree. However, for the veteran experiencing college entails much more. The opportunity to attend a college and/or university while the ultimate goal is to receive a degree, in addition, veterans perceive this as an opportunity to prepare themselves to know how to socialize and/or interact with civilians in the workplace. In other words, enrollment in higher education is a rehearsal for the “civilian world” or “civilian workforce”.

Another unique perspective to add to the literature regarding veterans in higher education.

Pertaining to limited studies on veteran’s motivation to pursue higher education, the concepts of obtaining a degree/receiving college experience and financial gain adds value to the literature specific to veterans, an underrepresented student population in the education literature. Further, this study, unlike others in the field to date, addresses how veterans perceive a difference in the learning environment from the military to higher education. This information is crucial not only to educators but to administrators in institutions of higher learning striving to promote a veteran friendly environment. The information gleaned from this study can serve as critical points to consider and possibly lead to discussions with an overall goal of professional development for the veteran student, faculty with responsible for teaching veterans, institutional policies, procedures and best practices. In addition, it can serve as a foundational platform for military counselors who can prepare military veteran students to be successful in the learning environment in higher education.

Veterans’ perception of the learning environment in the military compared to higher education indicated that there is a vast difference as it relates to student’s role, instructor’s role, pace of learning and individualism compare to collectivism. It is not surprising that the veteran’s perceptions and expectation of higher education would be measured using their past experience in the military as the yard stick. While such changes evidently created a cultural shock for the veterans with the potential of being a barrier to the learning process, it now possesses another layer to the veteran’s experiences and challenges of navigating higher education. Veterans are now required to relearn how to learn to ensure success in higher education.

Reflecting on the veterans’ comments, it is evident that they are not only familiar but appreciate the pedagogical approach to learning because it is one with which they are familiar, hence their military experience. However, in higher education, emphasis is placed on the andragogical approach grounded in humanism. However, the andragogical and pedagogical approaches are on two separate ends of the continuum. This creates not only a new “civilian world” but a new “learning world” for the veteran student, another added layer. One that requires additional changes and adjustment on behalf of the veteran student. While compared to the average civilian, behaviors the veteran student perceived to be inappropriate, unacceptable or even disrespectful maybe completely disregarded by the civilian student. However, because the veteran student has a unique background that includes experiences, knowledge, skills and codes of behavior, this acts as the lens for assessment.
The concept of the difference of individualism vs. collectivism in the learning environment is also echoed by the participants of this study and not addressed in previous literature on veterans as learners in higher education. Within the military, the concept of team and collectivism is emphasized throughout the organization utilizing the training environment as a foundational platform for this concept. However, within higher education, much emphasis in the learning environment is on individualism i.e. learning, assessments, etc. This switch from collectivism to individualism creates a vast culture shock for the veteran learner. This switch from collectivism to individualism provides much implication with regards to instructional methods utilized by professors in the learning environment. In addition, it has much implication for student organization for veterans in higher education with the view of the veteran student experiences a sense of collectivism.

**Implication for Practice**

The findings from this study coupled with application of principles of adult learning provides an underpinning for educators to promote a veteran friendly learning environment. As the transition to higher education is evidently a barrier to the learning process, it is paramount that adult educators address this barrier early in their courses, particularly the first week. As it is crucial for consideration to be given to the learning styles of the students, which influences the tone of the class and instructional methods. It is equally important for consideration to be given to possible barriers with regards to the learning process, specifically for veterans. It is advisable that educators be very cautious as to the process of obtaining this information as not to add an additional layer of negativity to the learning environment and experiences of veterans. Possible suggestions can be in a survey, discussion, individualize meeting with nontraditional students, individualized blogs or journals etc. with an overall objective of promoting a safe all-inclusive learning environment.

Once this information is ascertained, it is now the responsibility of the adult educator to utilize this information to promote a comfortable learning community that is beneficial not only to the traditional, conventional nontraditional but the unconventional nontraditional learner, the veteran student. Consideration should be given to type of assessments, group assignments, class discussion and any obvious contention within the learning environment.

Knowles (1990) identified six principles of adult learning that can be advantageous for adult educators to utilize with regards to addressing the transitioning of veterans to higher education from the military training environment. They are:

1. Adults are internally motivated and self-directed;  
2. Adults brings life experiences and knowledge to learning experiences;  
3. Adults are goal oriented;  
4. Adults are relevancy oriented;  
5. Adult are practical;  
6. Adult learners like to be respected

While it is evident that the veterans are internally motivated, their level of self-directed readiness may be an assumption. This is not a negative reflection on the veteran student as an individual but taking into consideration their past experiences in the military which may require some level of reconditioning or relearning in a higher education learning environment. On this premise, it is paramount that adult educators incorporate strategies and practices that can assist the veteran learner with becoming a self-directed learner. Educating the veteran learner with regards to the value of being self-directed is also critical to ensure "buy in" from the veteran.

Veterans are equipped with a vast amount of life experiences and knowledge that can be applicable in the learning environment. As a facilitator of learning, it is imperative to promote an environment that allow such experiences and knowledge to be welcomed and demonstrated how it can be applied to the lesson at hand. Skillfully include the veterans' experiences where applicable but be cautious to the sensitivity of their experiences. As adults are goal oriented, it is imperative that adult learners begin with small goals pertaining to the veterans as a confidence builder until they are fully acclimated to the new learning environment. While developing these goals, the veteran learner need to be made aware how these goals are not only relevant but practical, given a timeline and by extension the same principle applied to the information being gleaned in the respective learning environment. This would assist veterans with their need to be continuously accountable and assist with bringing some level of familiarity regarding the instructor's role. As respect is a requirement in any learning environment, it is essential that the veterans are not only respected as a veteran but as a learner, an adult, a contributor to the class, their beliefs and difference. Likewise, instructors must promote a learning environment where respect is essential.

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