

2018

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Recommended Citation

Terry, Anthony D. (2018) "Barriers to Academic Success Experienced by Student Veterans," *McNair Scholars Research Journal*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 12.
Available at: <https://commons.emich.edu/mcnair/vol11/iss1/12>

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BARRIERS TO ACADEMIC SUCCESS EXPERIENCED BY STUDENT VETERANS

Anthony D. Terry
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ABSTRACT

Thirty to forty percent of student veterans do not complete their postsecondary programs (Cate, 2013). Many student veterans lack the proper assistance when battling stressors that directly affect their experiences during college. The stress and depression associated with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder also prevent many veterans from succeeding. Veterans often experience culture shock when transitioning from the military to student life and may feel they have lost a part of their identity. This study addresses these challenges and highlights some of the issues returning veterans face when pursuing higher education. The study also examines the way in which student veterans' experiences in the military could help them succeed in college life. The study uses a mixed methods approach, employing a survey and focus groups.

INTRODUCTION

Barriers Experienced by Student Veterans

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2016), data from a 2010 study reported that veterans were less likely to have received a bachelor's degree than the total population. Compared to 28% of the total population, only 26% of veterans over 25 years of age had attained bachelor's degrees. This low percentage of degree completion may be influenced by the fact that veterans must overcome many challenges after transitioning from military

service to civilian life. Often, student veterans depend on government support as a source of income and are considered to be of low socioeconomic status (SES; iRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Many veterans continue to struggle with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) years after their time in the military. Hoge, Auchterlonie, and Milliken (2006) reported that “twenty percent (20%) of recent veterans have struggled with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or depression and 19% have experienced some form of traumatic brain injury (TBI)” (p. 1025). The stress and depression associated with PTSD are reasons that many veterans do not fully complete school. Student veterans have identified mental health problems as the primary reason why they drop out of school; unexpected sounds, such as fireworks or loud noises during class, can cause them to experience flashbacks of memories in war zones or stressful environments (Barnhart, 2011). There is also a belief in military culture that asking for help is a sign of weakness, causing many veterans to suffer alone rather than ask for help (Pease, Billera, & Gerard, 2016). Many college campuses have services to help veterans deal with PTSD while in school and counseling services for veterans in need.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Common Challenges Faced by Student Veterans

The structure of college and military life are vastly different, and for veterans, college life can take some getting used to. Students are encouraged to challenge authority by scrutinizing the factual basis of others’ claims, whereas strict obedience to authority is typically expected in the military (Elliot, 2015). Students are encouraged to develop their own viewpoints and mindset, while in the service, military personnel are expected to obey a clearly laid out set of commands and to engage in a highly-structured lifestyle. Military training leads many veterans to be unsure of what kind of response they should have to various academic situations.

In the college setting, it is common to discuss and explore student views and political standpoints (Elliot, 2015). In the military, however, it is the soldier’s responsibility to follow

orders. These cultural and political differences may make some veterans uncomfortable in class, especially when their professors' version of military history departs significantly from their firsthand experience (Gonzalez, 2013). Many military service-related experiences can make some veterans shy away from putting themselves in the limelight when discussing sensitive topics, for they do not want to be singled out (Gonzalez, 2013). The entire college experience can be alienating for veterans and may make some apprehensive to open up in class and speak their true thoughts.

While transitioning is a challenging enough task for student veterans, they must also face the problems of reintegrating back into a family environment. Veterans can be away from home for a few months to many years, depending on the length of their deployment. Reintegration into the civilian community can be an arduous task that involves veterans relearning family roles and responsibilities (Savitsky, Illingworth, & DuLaney, 2009). With many families lacking the resources to deal with veterans' suffering from PTSD, TBI, or other serious conditions, student veterans may be unable to fully focus on school work, resulting in missed classes and lower grades.

Financial difficulties can also become barriers to veteran student success. Returning veterans may already be low income, due to their modest pay in the military, and can experience increased risk of poverty and homelessness when they return (Savitsky et al., 2009). With the Post-911 GI Bill covering only 36 months of education, veterans are often forced to take high course loads in order to complete their studies before their funding ends. This creates further stress, adding to their financial and emotional challenges.

Many veterans have been out of a classroom setting for years. Some take classes online—or take advantage of programs on base to get college credits. Like most non-traditional students, veterans are often older than their student peers, and may have additional off-campus employment in order to support their families (Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014). Many veterans have been out of the classroom for years and are ill-prepared for the academic rigors of college life, making them unsure whether pursuing a degree is the right choice for them (Olsen et al., 2014).

Factors that Prepare Student Veterans for Success

Serving in the military and encountering many different cultures and situations, such as being in a war zone or commanding a team, enable student veterans to offer a unique perspective in the classroom. These experiences can change how veterans view life and can help them succeed in school (Olsen et al., 2014). Serving in the military also gives student veterans the confidence to react positively to and succeed in new situations. Having taken responsibility for other people enhances veterans' leadership and teamwork skills, enabling them to work with many groups of people (Olsen et al., 2014).

Key skills in the military include learning how to lead a group of people and work cooperatively. Military personnel must also communicate effectively with senior officers and support group morale, skills that can assist student veterans in group projects and in classes where teamwork is necessary. One veteran discussed the perceived importance of leadership: "I learned how to interact with people. I know how to work with people... how to be on a team and lead a team... I have self-confidence" (Olsen et al., 2014, p. 104). Student veterans are able to focus on classroom projects and on what they need to do to fulfill their role in the group. These skills improve student veterans' job opportunities by demonstrating their excellence in a variety of roles.

Another key advantage of military experience involves the student veterans' self-discipline. The strong work ethic and time management skills that were a part of military life are meaningful assets in the college setting (Olsen et al., 2014). One student veteran said, "Being an officer in the Air Force really helped me succeed in school. Having had the experiences from the military allowed me to be able to better know myself. After that, I was able to get two master degrees and two undergraduates because of the self-discipline gained from my military experience" (personal communication, November 15, 2016). Part of the military experience is learning how to behave in a presentable manner and not to bring shame to the military or the United States of America. Living in a military-structured environment for an extended time causes people to develop a strong sense of self in ways that many traditional students have not had the experiences to develop (Olsen et al., 2014).

METHOD

Participants

Participants in this study were student military veterans enrolled at Eastern Michigan University (EMU) during the Fall 2017 and Winter 2018 semesters. A total of 10 participants completed the focus groups. Participants were recruited from an email list of Eastern Michigan Student Veterans.

Measures

Questions assessed the student veterans' barriers to academic success, as well as some of the factors that have helped them on their academic journey. Questions focused on the challenges occurring during their transition from the military to civilian life, financial problems, and their ideas about ways to assist them in improving veteran academic success.

Procedure

The purpose of this research was to identify the relationship between prior experiences as a veteran and completion of post-secondary education. This study identified potential barriers and choices to increase student veteran retention. The study involved two focus groups (approximately five participants each) for approximately 45 minutes asking student veterans about their experiences at EMU and any barriers hindering the completion of their degree.

Prior to completing the study, Human Subjects IRB approval for EMU was obtained. Specifically, qualitative (focus groups) data was sought from student veterans at EMU. This study involved student veterans of all ages and backgrounds who are in the process of completing post-secondary education. Those who were interested and fit the criteria were considered for participation. Before data was collected, a consent form with an explanation of the research project was distributed. Once the consent was received, participants responded to specific questions in a focus group format (see Appendix for focus group questions). Once the focus groups were completed, the responses were collated based on common themes.

RESULTS

Description

Of those emailed for the focus group sessions, all 10 participants consented to participating. Both focus groups had a maximum of five participants. One participant was not available to stay during the second focus group meeting, but provided a written report of her answers to the questions. In general, participants were White (n=90), male (n=80), and served in the Navy (n=50). Table 1 describes the demographic characteristics of respondents.

Characteristic	Number (n=10)	Percent
Gender		
Male	8	80
Female	2	20
Race/Ethnicity		
White	9	90
African American	1	10
Military Branch		
Army	2	20
Navy	5	50
Marine Corps	3	30

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of focus group participants.

Transcriptions of the Focus Group Sessions

The participants were asked questions pertaining to the academic, financial, and emotional barriers to a veteran's academic success. Listed below are the responses taken from the veterans during the first focus group session.

Question 1: "What is the most valuable aspect of our Veteran Resources Center (VRC), for you?"

Participant 1: "For me, it is the community, being able to come in and having people there and we all help each other out. It has made a big difference in my life since attending Eastern."

Participant 2: “For me, the most valuable aspect is having people to guide me through some of the bureaucracy. [The staff] is invaluable. [They] helped me with the financial aid office and all kinds of crazy questions, having someone like that you can talk to is a big help. Help with getting things done has been the most valuable aspect for me.”

Participant 3: “There are several different aspects that I found helpful at VSSS. Some of us were a lot older when we got out of the military. I found it difficult to relate to other people when I went back to school and before I started using the Veterans Resource Center [VRC]. It was especially difficult to relate to somebody young and with someone who doesn’t have any military experience or background. It was a lot easier after I found the VRC. I discovered there was a group of people here that I can get to know, that I can relate to and who come from a similar background. That was the big thing for me.”

Participant 4:” Coming out of the Marine Corps, everything was so easy and you’ve done it for so long, it was just natural. Now I was coming back to school where I hadn’t been in eleven years. I did not have any college experience and trying to navigate the college culture was like the first time walking into the VA and trying to figure everything out on my own. Everyone here at the VRC made it so easy. They made my transition to a college student very smooth. I am still impressed with how incredibly smooth it was because I thought that it would be a lot harder. Those guys made it incredibly easy.”

Participant 5: “I would have to agree with that. One of the things for me was the fact that-[the staff] would reach out to me. This shows how much effort they are putting in. This outreach effort is on top of the whole community aspect that the Veterans Center creates.”

Question 2: “What brought you into the Vetera Center office?”

Participant 5: “I heard about how well the EMU veteran community was at EMU and how big of a community it was so I sought it out.”

Participant 4: “It was the same for me. I thought to myself, where is the safest place on campus and the first place where I’m going to be able to go in, get help, and feel comfortable. It was the Veterans Resource Center. I had no idea how to get started or even how to use the GI Bill. I didn’t even register for classes until I went to the VRC. I went in specifically looking for help registering for classes and making sure that my GI Bill is paid for and that it pays for my classes. These reasons are what brought me in. I picked Eastern to come to because it’s rated the top 5 in the nation for veteran-friendly schools. This made it easy. I just said that I am going to start at the Veteran Center before I go anywhere else.”

Participant 2: “I heard about the Veteran Center and then my Vocational Rehabilitation counselor said that I had to certify with them once a semester. I decided to go see what this place looks like. Once I saw it, I was hooked. It’s a nice place to hang out.”

Participant 3: “I think that is how I started out as well. I was just going in to get certified. When I went to school in 2004, the VRC was just a small office with one person. It has come such a long way since, it’s a huge difference now. I always stopped in to talk to the people working. I talked to [the staff]. Getting to know people really opened up doors and different avenues. That is how I got involved with the Veterans Resource Center. I started stopping by more and more often and getting to know more and more what services they provided. That really helped me tremendously.”

Participant 1: “For myself, [the staff] reached out to me wanting me to utilize my knowledge in Biology and Chemistry to help other students. I have been there ever since. That was a year and a half ago, and I did not know the VRC existed before that.”

Question 3: “*To go along with the question about what brought you into the office, I want to get you to focus on a few more specific things. Think of people, agencies, or other influences who were the biggest influence in your transition out of the military and onto this campus. What made you trust them and take their*

advice? What person was your biggest influence in your transition and what made you trust their judgment?"

Participant 5: "I would have to say my girlfriend, since she has been with me every day for five years, since getting out of the military. I have my mom and my dad, and they are obviously big influences, but their knowledge is not there, they are just supportive. My girlfriend went here, and she told me a lot about the campus itself. She did not know a lot about the military community other than that it is a supportive community. Yeah, she is one of the biggest influences, and I trust her."

Participant 2: "It is kind of tough to pick one influence, since I'm in Voc. Rehab. My counselor is pretty decent and has steered me in the right direction. In terms of deciding to go to Eastern, EMU is known for Social Work so it was kind of a no-brainer. Eastern's Social Work program is very well known, and I know a lot of people that graduated from the program. I know one good friend who graduated from here, and so I was like, okay. Also, they say it's like Eastern's social workers get their hands dirty, that they get a lot of practical experience. I think that was a big influence for me."

Participant 1: "For myself, it was my influence during transition onto campus it was my advisor of academia and the Health Services. She has been with me every step of the way, even before I got here when I was still in community college, so she has been really helpful, and I trust her. She is the one who spurred me into getting a graduate degree, so she hasn't done me wrong yet."

Participant 4: "I'd say [the staff]. [The Director of the Veterans Student Support Services program] was the first person that I met on campus, and you know the moment I met him I could tell that he was extremely knowledgeable. He calmed my anxiety about starting school big time. As far as the VSSS program, I fall under the disabled veteran as well as first-generation college. I was incredibly nervous to start, and then, in just an hour with [him] I felt really comfortable, like I can do this. From day one, he

set me up for success career-wise, making sure that I focus on not only school, but that I focus on the outside. [He] wanted to make sure that I am doing things that are going to benefit me and what I want to do with my life. He's just been awesome."

Participant 5: "Once I actually got into the office, [they were] definitely a big influence."

[All agreed].

Question 4: "While we are still on that train of thought, thinking about people that are out there for you. Try to think of someone outside of our VSSS group. It could be someone on campus, someone off campus, a job, a family member, whatever it might be, but who is or has been your positive role model?"

Participant 2: "I think I mentioned it before, but I have a good friend that's a social worker that graduated from here. He's not a vet but he might as well have been. He has the right skills to be a social worker. I often joke with him that I owe him money for therapy. He is just a really good guy and a positive role model, especially for the field that I'm going into."

Participant 1: "I also have a really good friend who spurred me into going to college in the first place. He just went back to law school and is in his 30's graduating, so that's been a huge inspiration to me. He is like my little cheerleader, so it's been pretty great."

Participant 4: "I would say just a lot of vets on campus that I've met that come to the Veterans Resource Center. Again, one of my biggest worries being the old guy going to class. I would think to myself, I'll sit in the back, won't make friends, get my degree, and get it over with. I felt like I would have a hard time connecting with a lot of these 18-year-old and 19-year-old kids. It's weird because now I feel like I have a family here. There are days that are hard, and I'll take a break between classes to come to the Veterans Resource Center. It just makes things better. A lot of the people I meet in the Veterans Center have been inspirational. Seeing what they have done whether it be career wise or how they

strive to push forward with their goals and plans, inspirational. It's been great to say yeah, we can all do this, let's do it, and some days when I don't want to do it, seeing someone else do it is like, yeah okay I have to do that too. So, yeah, just a lot of the vets I've met have been positive role models."

Question 5: *"Okay, now we are going to move on to thinking a little more introspective. Wayne really pushes for planning for the future. Keeping that in mind, what is your vision for the future and moving into the future? Right along with that, I'd like to know what do you think your life will be like when you are 70 years old? Try to give a little more color to what is the vision for your future."*

Participant 3: "I am going to be graduating in the upcoming months (December), and I'm looking to go graduate school. I am looking to take time off and to getting a job and some experience in social work. Those are the ideas that I'm kicking around. I hope that I am retired and playing golf when I'm 70."

Participant 1: "I'm going to grad school and applying right now to get a PhD. When I'm 70, I hope that I've done everything that I wanted to do, and that I'm still healthy enough to keep doing other awesome things."

Participant 5: "In the short term, I plan to graduate. After that, it is really up in the air. I would like to find a decent job or be working my way up to a decent job in my field. I want my job to be challenging and stable, so this is somewhat worrisome. I would like to be working on some films in the future, but to just be working and have a steady job would be great. When I'm 70, I hope to be alive and playing golf as well."

Participant 2: "I'm probably the closest to 70 in the room. If you'd asked me 10 years ago, I would have said that I would be retired by 70. Now, I'm not sure. I'll have to see where the social work field takes me. I could see myself still working if I'm in the right place helping people. Somebody told me that maybe I could go back and teach someday, we'll see about that. Like everyone

else, I want to be healthy, and I would like to be able to enjoy myself at 70, no matter what I'm doing."

Participant 5: "That's something that I'd like to do before I'm 70, to teach and give back."

Question 6: "Many people brought up their careers and that's interesting, considering the next question. We recently did a survey that I think most of you probably participated in. When we did the survey approximately 50% of veterans on campus said they were currently working in a job or doing research, something that supports their academic major or aligns pretty close to it. Now, we want to hear from you.

"If you are [in a degree-related job or internship], how and why? I know that some of you actually are, so I should get some feedback here. Do you think that this is helping or hurting you, as far as your academic success? Are you working so much that you can't do your homework, or are you working and it's going right along with your school? In addition, if you are working outside of your major, can you tell us a little bit about that and whether it is helping or hurting your academic success?"

Participant 1: "I will start. I have been doing undergraduate research in my major for the past year and a half, and I am finishing out my last semester. It has helped my academic success because it gives me a much broader idea of what it is I'm dealing with. I'm learning all these little details in my Biology and Microbiology classes, but you don't really understand the concepts until you're dealing with them in your own hands. My job, I am tutor to many subjects. Tutoring is helping me in so many ways because I get to learn more. Tutoring also helps me do better in my classes; it keeps me focused."

Participant 4: "Because [the staff] is amazing, they put me in contact with somebody the first day I was here. That connection has since grown, and now I am getting ready to wrap up my 2nd semester as an executive director. I thought the job would not have much to do with my major, but I was wrong. It turns out that I have

actually been writing a lot for both my major and minor with this job. It's stressful because it is a little tighter having school on top of working. There are days where it's harder, but, overall, I think it has helped in ways I could not have imagined. I had the opportunity to write for a director, I've written for NPR, and for all these different outlets. And, I don't feel like by the time I graduate I'll be starting from the bare minimum. I feel like I'm going to have my resume built and rounded by the time I am getting into the world, instead of having to start at square one and move forward. As stressful as it is some days, my grades haven't dropped at all; it has only helped."

Participant 5: "For me, what I'm doing right now is right along the lines of what I did in the military, so it's helped. As far as academic success, yeah it has helped, as far as confidence and in my major. I am still trying to balance everything now that I have a job that is exactly what I'm learning in college. Balancing both college and work is something that I'm still working on. I definitely think having a resume built before you graduate is huge."

Participant 2: "I'm doing a degree-related work study job. One of the things I decided before I started college was that I was not going to do a job like dining services or anything like that. I want a job that can be meaningful and contributing towards my goal and Social Work degree. I'm working at the food pantry on campus, and it's great because it's flexible, and a couple of my shifts are between classes. I get done with one class, come here [Veterans Center] and hang out. Then I go to work and to class. It's a really good job, and it's in the social work field. It is a good feeling to help students. My job definitely helps, and, when I do finally graduate, I'll be able to list the years of working there on my resume."

Participant 3: "Where I'm working, I guess it's made me stronger, but it's not in line with my degree in Social Work. The internship that I did was, and it gave me lot of experience that was extremely beneficial and a great learning experience. My internship really prepared me for going out into the world."

Question 7: “Great! Now that we’ve talked about jobs, we move into the part that comes from a job. Try to think of a situation, no matter how big or how small, to talk about. We want to see if everybody has common ground when we start to talk about these ones.

My question is, are your finances currently a concern for you? This could mean now or what’s coming in the future. Are they causing you stress? And what about that financial situation do you think causes the stress?”

Participant 1: “I can answer this. This is something that is weighing on me very heavily while applying to graduate school and getting a Ph.D. I want to be a clinical psychologist, and it is going to be expensive; it is going to cost a lot of money. It’s like a rock hanging over my head right now. I’m still going to do it, but I’ve never faced taking on a burden like this before. It is stressful thinking about how much things cost and how busy I am going to be. It’s stressful thinking about whether or not I’m going to have time to work to bring in extra income. It is stressful thinking about how much money that I’m going to have to take out just to live and for personal expenses. It’s also stressful to think whether or not I am going to be able to pay money off in a reasonable amount time once I graduate. So yes, that [finances] is a big, big stress.”

Participant 2: “I’m fortunate that Voc Rehab is covering my books, tuition, and all that, but it is still expensive. Work study helps but is only \$1500 a semester. If it were not for the fact that I have a service-connected disability, I’d have to seriously look at having a second job just to make ends meet and pay for things like rent and food; it’s a real concern. I am doing good right now, but I still have a bit of stress trying to figure things out. I still find myself having to take out loans when I didn’t want to. I know that I’ll be working past 70 to pay loans off. I guess my stress is having money for things outside school.”

Participant 5: “For me, finances are always a concern. I don’t think there will ever be a time in my life where I will

not worry about finances. Fortunately, the GI Bill has helped tremendously. Wayne also helped tremendously by letting me know about the Pell Grant and that I could still apply for it. Now I am getting a couple grand per semester, and that helped tremendously. Currently, I do not really have financial concerns; it's just looking to the future and when that all goes away is the stressful part."

Participant 3: "I have a lot of financial concerns now and about the future. I had to take out loans. Even though I get vocational rehab benefits, I decided to take out loans to do some other things and pay for other things that I needed. I've also had to do some other things financially, so it's a little bit of a concern right now. I don't let it stress me out; I just handle things one day at a time. I will just handle stressful financial things as they come along. I'm hoping that I'll be able to get approved for my master's degree because, if I don't, I do not think that I will ever go back."

Follow-up question: "So now that we're thinking about our finances, current and future, do you believe that you are a good money manager? What about money management would you like to be better at?"

Participant 4: "I'm getting better. I definitely think there was a point when I was not the best money manager. I'm lucky now. With this job, I am making more than I made before, and I was smart enough to instantly start paying off debt. I'm getting better at managing money. I actually have a savings account for the first time in my life. I am trying to make sure that I manage my finances better than I did in my twenties. It's getting better. I definitely think that the different people at the veteran's center have helped. It's often been said, 'Hey, do you need help figuring out your bills?' Or, they help you find different ways to make sure that you're managing correctly. I think this is something that I still need to take advantage of more and make sure that I'm being proactive."

Participant 5: "I'm in that same boat. I think some of my bad habits from the military have kind of carried over, like

spending and managing habits. In the service, [I] really was not worried about finances. I was just happy to be there getting a paycheck. Now, it's a different story, as far as managing money goes. I'm getting better, but I think I could definitely improve and save more."

Participant 2: "I'm okay at managing my money. Although, through life, becoming homeless, and all that, you lose all your money. I need to work better at sticking to the budget and in making the money last; that is the difficult part for me. I keep telling myself, "How long does this have to last, and how many months until the next disbursement?" Sticking to a budget is definitely why I need to get better at managing money. I could write a budget up, but being able stick to it and, like Nathan was saying, saving a little bit is something I need to work on."

Participant 1: "I would agree with that: budgeting would help me. I use the *mint* budgeting app. It's a really cool app, but I just didn't pay attention to any of the advice it was trying to give me. So, like Nathan said, you get used to having a steady income in the military and then not thinking about managing money. You didn't really have any bills in the service, so you are just not thinking about it. I'm not a very good money manager, but I seem to keep having enough for what I need."

Participant 5: "I feel the same way. Looking back, you think if I did better back then, I'd be a lot better off right now."

Participant 4: "The biggest thing for me is trying to think of the future. In the military, pretty much all of my twenties, I don't think I have anything to show for it material-wise. I just blew my money. I didn't care, and I had food and heat, and then all of sudden I didn't have those things, and the Marine Corps was not giving me a check anymore. It was hard because I didn't know how to manage money back then. When I look back at how much money I could have put into savings – but I just didn't care at the time because I had everything I needed."

Participant 2: “And if you keep saving until you’re like my age, you’ll have all this money.”

Question 8: “*Now we’re going to move out of the money realm and think about scheduling your classes. How do you feel about your class schedule now and some of the ones that you’ve had in the past since they’ve changed? And, do you think it’s difficult to register for a schedule that fits the kind of life that we’ve talked about in the previous questions? We’ve discussed money management, transitioning, role models, and people that you interact with on campus. How does that class schedule fit into that life?*”

Participant 5: “I put school above lot of things because that was my goal when I got out of the service. While in the service, education was one of the biggest things my unit pushed. I try to schedule things around my classes. I am somewhat comfortable with the GI Bill and having to be full-time to get the maximum monthly housing allowance. My GI Bill housing allowance pays for a majority of my expense and gets me through day to day. Everything else (job) that helps to support me, I can schedule around my classes. The only difficulty is actually scheduling what my program has to offer and then scheduling that around what else I need to take in order to maintain my level of housing allowance to support me. It hasn’t been that difficult yet because I’m fairly new and still have a lot of classes to choose from. There have been issues though. For example, my program doesn’t offer a lot of Winter semester classes, but my program offers a lot of summer courses. So, the difficult part is figuring out how to maintain my maximum housing allowance and tuition benefits.”

Follow-up comment: “*Just to clarify for the video, what I’m hearing you say is that you have to take enough credit hours to get a big enough pay check to live on. The BHA, or basic housing allowance, is the monthly stipend you receive from your GI Bill education benefits.*”

Participant 5: “Yes, exactly. And trying to convey that to a lot of the advisers is a challenge.”

Additional follow-up comment: “So what I’m hearing you say is that you will tell your advisor something like, “I need to take at least this many credits.” And the advisor will tell you that you really don’t need that class. And you will tell them you know that but that you need maximum credits to get the maximum monthly BHA check. Is this what I’m hearing you say?”

Participant 5: “Yes. Exactly. And that a lot of classes that I need to take for my program are only offered during the summer semester. So, I’d have to take a lot more credits during the summer to be able to get that full housing allowance.”

Participant 2: “Like you, I have to look at my schedule during the fall and winter and make sure that I take 12 hours in order to receive the full BHA allowance. I know I can get by with half of the BHA allowance in the summer. I was fortunate because I am considered a transfer student. This means that all the hours I took at Purdue brought me up to senior status, so I have priority on scheduling [so] this semester was not that bad. Next semester, I got everything I wanted, and because I work in a pantry, they work around my schedule. I have good Social Work advisors; they sit down and kind of lay everything out. They say here’s the classes, so you know where you’re at. I might do a little tweaking to maintain that housing allowance balance. Eastern has a pretty decent system to register on the Web with.”

Participant 3: “It was always difficult to try and find the balance and especially taking on a full load just to try to get the extra money. I always had to play it by ear and get a feel for how to balance schedule with work and school and family, and it’s always been kind of a challenge.”

Question 9: *“On a scale of 1 to 10 where a 1 is very worried about your future and 10 is I feel prepared and purpose-driven about my future, how are you feeling about life since transitioning out of the military? Again, 1 being really worried and 10 feeling very prepared.”*

Participant 1: “Ten.”

“So, you are saying that you are very prepared?”

(to Participant 1).

Participant 1: “Yes.”

Participant 4: “There was a long time when I felt lost and couldn’t find my footing, where I had no idea. I had all these plans that I wanted for my future but no actual road map to get there. I just was not sure what the next year or however many years was going to hold. This is probably the first time since I started Eastern and over the course of the last few months where I feel like a purpose-driven 9 or 10. I now have a goal and desire, a roadmap. Now I just have to keep pushing myself to do it, but I can see it and will get there. I see the light at the end of the tunnel, and before I didn’t even know if I was in the tunnel.”

Participant 2: “I’m still kind of worried about my future. I would still say that I am a five because I have 2½ years to go before getting my bachelor’s, and then I’ll see about getting a master’s. My biggest worry, and maybe it’s just me, is worrying about what kind of job I’m going to get when I finish. I want to help people, but I also want to be able to make a living and pay back some of these student loans that I am incurring. I feel good about my purpose, probably rate that a seven. I’m just now getting comfortable with college life – this is my first full semester. I’m sure my number will go up because there is a demand for social workers, so I should be able to find a job doing something that I am interested in.”

Participant 5: “I’d have to say a solid eight. There is no real set path in my chosen career field so that is a little worrisome.”
The uncertainty?

Participant 5: “Yeah, that part’s a 2 on the scale.”

Participant 3: “I would probably say a seven. I have similar worries that John mentioned, getting a job and being able to make a decent living. With all my loans and other expenses, it is a little concerning. These are some of the reasons why I’m thinking about going on to get my master’s. A master’s degree really changes the scope of things. There is a big income earning difference between a BSW and an MSW.”

Participant 5: “You really do not need a degree. I decided to come to college to learn not necessarily to learn about my job because I already knew how to do a lot of it. I’m the kind of person that always thinks there is always something more I can learn. It was more or less finding that purpose, connecting with more people, and finding purpose and direction of where I wanted to go.”

Question 10: “*Are there any services that you wish were available at the VRC or within our program, both? What are we missing? There’s always room for improvement.*”

Participant 3: “I have mentioned this before, but there is no room for a private enclosed study room. I get easily distracted and have a hard time concentrating when I hear a lot of talking and things going on in the background, so I was hoping for a quiet room. The VRC has been really good about letting me use rooms that are not used. Again, adding a dedicated quiet study room would be something that I would want added.”

Participant 2: “I know that the VRC just got more and better computers, and that’s been a big help. I know [the staff] is good about...going over my resume. There’s also support for looking for work; that’s always been good.”

Participant 4: “I don’t know how this would work, or even if it’s even doable. It’s not necessarily something that I would need right now, but maybe down the road, a veteran’s-specific mental health professional housed in the VRC. Recently, I was at

the *Celebration of Student Writing* and a high majority of students did research on papers on student mental health. It made me think about the fact that, singling out veterans, obviously we know the statistics on veterans' mental health issues. I thought what if there was just one more place, what if there was a specific person at the VRC and that was their only job? I know that we have those people on campus; we have student mental health services. It's just not the same as a veteran going and talking to a regular psychiatrist, compared to somebody [who] has experienced mental health issues or knows specifically veteran issues. I think it would be a good resource to have."

Participant 2: "You mean like having our own social worker?"

Participant 4: "I'm sure that it would not be easy to figure out how that happens, but I think it would be really helpful."

Participant 2: "I saw a [staff member's] email from the VRC that said something about upcoming windows to apply for scholarships. I guess just making sure that I find other financial opportunities outside of the Pell Grant and loans. I've had a few nibbles, and [the staff] gave me a book to look at and some other things. I guess for them to just make sure that I am not missing something; every dollar helps."

Participant 2: "A cup of coffee is nice."

Follow-up question: "Can anybody think of anything else?"

Participant 2: "I think it is great. [The Director of the VRC] runs it like USO, and we even get free food once in a while."

Conclusion: "I want to thank you guys a lot. I think it was really good and very productive, and I'm glad. Thank you guys for all for talking so much, and I'm really happy. Again, I really appreciate it, and we will get back with you after we get some results put

together. I'll keep everyone in the loop of common themes and stuff that we came across. Once again, thank you very much."

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to understand the barriers student veterans experience on their path to academic success. Our results indicate that these barriers can be separated into three categories: academic, financial, and emotional. The academic barriers for student veterans consisted mainly of the culture shock of transitioning from the military to the college environment, including getting used to the independence given to veterans in the college setting. Emotionally, having the Veteran Resource Center has gone a long way in providing a safe and secure place for veterans to rest and chat with those who can understand their experiences. Their primary financial barrier has been how to manage their personal finances and educational expenses, with many seriously worried about their long-term finances. Even faced with these barriers, student veterans continue to persist on their journey to academic success. A key support in this journey belongs to the Veterans Resource Center, which was repeatedly praised in the focus groups. As one veteran noted, "To me, it is the community, being able to come in and having people there. We all help each other out. It has made a big difference in my life since I've been at Eastern."

Limitations

Participation for the study was limited to a small number of student veterans enrolled at EMU during the Fall 2017 and Winter 2018 semesters. These results do not represent the entire veteran population on campus. Using a larger sample of the EMU student veteran population and comparing it to other universities will provide more support for our data. The focus group was completed by student veterans who consented and participated in the study. Other questions relating to mental health, disabilities, whether or not the student veteran was active duty or had been in combat were not asked, which also limits the

overall findings.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies can incorporate these focus group findings and create a survey to sample student veterans more broadly. Questions could go further in depth about financial status, emotional well-being, and academic success. Also, including questions about disability, family status, mental health, and other topics would expand the current study. Future research will examine the veteran services available at the university and ways to improve the existing services to help student veterans.

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APPENDIX

Focus Group Questions

1. *What is the most valuable aspect of our Veteran Resources Center (VRC), for you?*
2. *What actually brought you into the office to begin with?*
3. *Who was your biggest influence in your transition to college and what made you trust their judgment? Who is your positive role model?*
4. *What is your vision for the future and moving into the future?*
5. *When VRC did a survey, approximately 50% of veterans, on campus, said they were currently working in a job or doing research. Is that true for you and do you think that is helping or hurting your academic success?*
6. *Are your finances currently a concern for you?*
7. *Do you believe you are a good money manager?*
8. *How do you feel about scheduling your classes?*
9. *How are you feeling about life since transitioning out of the military?*
10. *Any services that you wish were available at the VRC?*