

# **A FORMAL LITERATURE REVIEW OF VETERAN ACCULTURATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

**Michael M. Bichrest<sup>§</sup>**

**Doctoral Student, Ed.D. Program in Leadership and Learning, Rivier University**

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## **Abstract**

*The transition of military personnel to higher education is a topic that needs to be understood in order to meet the needs of a new generation of veterans returning from Afghanistan and Iraq. While there are certain similarities with prior military drawdowns, such as physical and emotional traumas, homelessness, unemployment, and the educational needs of reintegrating service members, there are also opportunities unique to these soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen that could lead to improved life outcomes for this new group of student-veterans. This formal literature review examined existing research on veteran adjustment to higher education. It found that change, technology, and funding are critical areas for understanding the Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation New Dawn (OND) veteran cohort. These areas should be thoughtfully considered, in order to determine the best research-based methods for assisting these individuals with their adjustments to an educational setting.*

## **Introduction**

When veterans return from military service, one important avenue of return to civilian life and career is through higher education – however, little is known about the ways to best address their educational needs. Ackerman, DiRamio, and Mitchell (2008) have noted the limited amount of scholarly literature devoted to student-veterans who have served in Afghanistan and Iraq. This lack of information was also a major discussion point at the most recent annual meeting of the Student Veterans of America in which they partnered with the United States Department of Veterans Affairs in order to begin to track degree attainment by veterans (Student Veterans of America, 2013). Such tracking is a significant first-step in determining if veterans are succeeding in education: however, as with past veteran cohorts, there are still many challenges to understanding the college transition for prior military personnel (Veterans Transition Guide, 2011).

Important differences in cultural and perceptual perspectives exist between student-veterans and more traditional students. According to Hanafin (2012) few college students, faculty, or administrators themselves have military backgrounds leaving them ill-equipped to understand the challenges that veterans may face. What may be needed in order to address some of these challenges is a more thorough understanding by veterans themselves of the changes they are experiencing through higher education, which may, in-turn assist them in their transition.

According to Pascarella and Terezini (2005), subject-matter learning in college is not simply a function of an institution's actions (e.g., curricular choices) towards a student in instructional settings. Rather, much depends upon the ways in which students make use of the range of learning opportunities provided by the institution. One aspect of this intersection of student and institutional activities is

acculturation. Acculturation is an important part of personal development. Defined as: contacts between groups of individuals with different cultural norms of behavior (Bateson, 1972) acculturation is a social process that occurs in a context in which newcomers and members of the host culture are in dynamic contact with each other (Padilla & Perez, 2003). At various life stages, individuals must acculturate from one group to another. Understanding may ease that transition, and potentially improve life outcomes. For example, veterans transitioning from military service to college may be assisted in their acculturation by knowing that there is a predictable process to their adjustment (Murt, 2006). The more clearly that veterans understand the process of moving in, moving through, and moving out, as discussed by Ackermann, et al. (2008) the better transitions they may be able to make from their roles as service members, to students, and then, to non-military society in general.

While soldiers enrolled in degree programs experienced many of the same problems as other students enrolled in degree programs (Beausoleil-Holt, 2008) there are unique aspects to the challenges that accompany many student-veterans throughout their educational experience that other, more traditional students, may not understand. Veterans have been designated as a vulnerable population under the Americans with Disabilities Act (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012). According to Brown (2009) veterans are often dealing with both the visible and invisible injuries of war. Hamrick and Rumann (2010) describe a lack of information for the Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation New Dawn (OND) cohort of student-veterans, stating that future research on the topic of acculturation will be vital to understanding veteran experiences and managing outcomes.

Few who have experienced service in the military would question that they had entered into a sub-culture. In order to function within the military sub-culture, individuals must learn new norms and behaviors. Mastering military culture serves veterans well in the military, and many of the associated traits have benefits that continue after their tours of service have ended: however, upon exiting that sub-culture, one must re-learn, to varying degrees, the norms and behaviors of the individual's cultures of origin. While this may seem easy, since one was enculturated, or, brought up within, the particular culture to which one is returning, that return may not be the same for everyone. Traumas may also exacerbate the circumstances under which a given veteran must make the transition back into their original culture, as can individual differences in skills, strengths, and personal history.

The concept of transition and acculturation as it relates to veterans is not new. The correlation between an individual's veteran status and their academic success was established shortly after the Second World War (Frederickson & Schrader, 1950). Such findings and concepts support the idea of a clear need to understand student-veterans as a distinct culture group in order to better facilitate their acculturation. For military personnel returning from Afghanistan and Iraq, this means that our society must meet these veterans on their terms, to assist in their acculturation according to their individual needs.

Examination of earlier generations of military veterans can provide a useful starting point to our understanding of today's student-veterans. In his book *Clash of Cultures* Hanafin (2012) discusses veteran acculturation from the perspective of a Vietnam veteran who having completed his own transition was reflecting upon his experience, now, as a member of academia. Hanafin (2012) notes the differences between the military and academic institutions in terms of organization, values, and societal orientation and makes the case that these cultural differences are part of the reason for the acculturation challenges of student-veterans. The military tends to be structured with beliefs in service, bravery, and obedience while being quite removed from society, as well as, conservative. Conversely, academic organizations are less structured, with beliefs in education, intellect, and questioning while being only

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somewhat removed from society and more liberal (Hanafin, 2012). How these organizational structures impact veterans may have a lot to do with veteran acculturation to college. Yet, it may be precisely these differences which may benefit veterans as they learn to better understand their transition process since they might provide growth opportunities by allowing veterans to experience a new organizational environment.

This literature review examines the current scope of understanding regarding the adjustment of OEF/OIF/OND student-veterans to higher education. Specifically, it asked the question, what do we currently know about the acculturation experiences of today’s veterans on college and university campuses?

**Methods**

This literature review utilized a keyword search to identify published material related to student-veteran acculturation. The review included two generalist databases, *Academic Search Premier* and *WorldCat*, chosen for their comprehensive content coverage and by author preference, as well as, *Pro Quest Dissertations and Theses* and *Pro Quest Military Collection*, which were selected specifically for the dissertation and military sources these databases contain. A number of different combinations of words found in the literature were tried before determining which keywords produced a viable number of relevant sources (see Table 1). Veteran and adjustment were the final keywords selected. Raw hits were 877. Inclusion criteria used to limit the search responses were: English language sources, publications that addressed OEF/OIF/OND veterans, and references to colleges and universities within the United States. Once sources to be included were identified, they were sorted according to emerging themes.

**Table 1.** Topic search by database

<b>Keyword</b>	<b>Search Premier</b>	<b>Dissertation</b>	<b>WorldCat®</b>	<b>Military</b>
Veteran	133745	4268	42648	Not included
Veteran*	133792	4275	28801	Not included
Assimilation	18810	7571	60397	Not included
Assimilation*	19054	7840	69171	Not included
Assimilation* veteran*	0	0	76	Not included
Re-assimilation*	19	19	18	Not included
Re-assimilation* veteran*	0	0	181763	Not included
Acculturation	4506	15035	28892	Not included
Acculturation*	4511	5355	6	Not included
Re-acculturation	15	15	25	Not included
Acculturation veteran	0	0	41	Not included
Acculturation* veteran*	0	0	0	Not included
Re-acculturation* veteran*	0	0	1	Not included
Enculturation	4822	456	5	Not included
Enculturation* veteran*	0	0	5	Not included
Military veteran	4550	0	5095	Not included
Veteran and acculturation	44	86	25	3
Veteran* and acculturation*	44	25	41	1
Veteran and adjustment	657	156	40	24

Note: There was a lack of topic specific material with veteran and acculturation keywords resulting in the final selection of veteran and adjustment keywords that provided adequate subject sources.

## Results

Sixty sources met criteria for inclusion in this review (see Table 2). Two additional sources, Frederickson and Schrader (1950) and Hanafin (2012), were not exact matches with the screening criteria, as they did not address the OEF/OIF/OND veteran cohort, but the information that they provided was vital to a thorough understanding of the topic of veteran adjustment or acculturation. They are included in the thematic analysis of the review.

**Table 2.** Database and criteria results for Veteran and Adjustment

<b>Database</b>	<b>Total Studies</b>	<b>Secondary Studies</b>	<b>Included Studies</b>
WorldCat®	40	Not included	1
Academic Search Premier	657	Not included	7
Pro Quest Dissertations	156	46	51
Pro Quest Military	24	Not included	1
<b>Criteria:</b>			
English Language	Not included	46	62
American Schools	Not included	46	62
OEF/OIF/OND	Not included	45	61

Note: Search results overlapped across some databases. Variances for OEF/OIF/OND are the result of the outside source. Adjustment to College.

**Table 3.** Study method by source type

<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Article</b>	<b>Book</b>	<b>Dissertation</b>	<b>Web-based</b>
Quantitative	2	1	0	0
Qualitative	8	0	5	1
Correlational	2	1	0	1
Single subject	1	0	0	0
Mixed method	0	0	1	0
Other	22	2	0	15

Note: "Other" refers to informational, persuasive, and informal sources.

Identified sources ranged across a variety of publication formats, including articles (n=35, 56.45%), books (n=4, 6.45%), dissertations (n=6, 9.68%), and web-based sources (n=17, 27.42%). Three studies represented quantitative designs (4.84%), fourteen qualitative designs (22.58%), four correlational studies (6.45%), one single-subject (1.61%), one mixed-methods design (1.61%), and thirty-nine sources that either were not research-based or did not employ an identifiable research methodology (62.90%). Table 3 provides a summary of the included sources by methodology and type.

Nine overlapping themes were identified within the included publications. The themes are as follows:

- *Change* refers to; transition, reintegration, acculturation, assimilation, adjustment or other terms associated with veteran progress toward "civilianization" through education.

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- The *Website* designation was used for sources that provided on-line offerings for veterans regarding educational transition such as the Student Veterans of America or various university and college sites with veteran specific information.
- *G.I. Bill* referred to sources that provided information about how veterans finance their educational transition using benefits earned through military service.
- *Uniqueness of Student-Veterans* was identified for those sources that noted the importance of considering veterans as a separate culture group within the higher education student community.
- *Reserve/Guard* was used to identify those sources that dealt with personnel that were not part of the regular service components.
- *Active component* was used to identify those sources that dealt with personnel that were not part of the Reserve/Guard components.
- *Community college* designated sources that discussed these types of academic institutions.
- *Informational* refers to sources that provided material for transitioning military personnel about education.
- *Other* designated sources that did not fit any of the other themes.

Of the themes represented, Change was the most frequently occurring (n=19, 30.65%). There were fourteen website sources (22.58%), making this the second largest theme grouping of materials. The third highest number of source themes is G.I. Bill, with twelve relevant results (19.35%). Informational results listed seven sources (11.29%). The “Other” category of themes in this review represented articles discussing; women in the military, a suicide prevention program, the development of a reintegration program, and an article referencing a study of military education centers.

**Table 4.** Primary themes discussed by included studies

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Number of sources</b>	<b>Percentage of total</b>
Uniqueness of student-veterans	3	4.84%
G. I. Bill	12	19.35%
Reserve / Guard	2	3.23%
Active component	0	0.00%
Community college	1	1.61%
Change	19	30.65%
Informational	7	11.29%
Other	4	6.45%
Website	14	22.58%

Note: Change in this instance refers to; transition, reintegration, acculturation, assimilation, adjustment or other terms associated with veteran progress toward “civilianization” through education.

While all of these sources met the search criteria, they did not present information that would allow them to be placed within the larger theme groupings. However, they were included in the review since they represented sources that give researchers information about the scope of current literature surrounding the topic of veteran acculturation in higher education (6.45%). Uniqueness of student-veterans had three sources (4.84%). However, this was included in later discussion as a sub-theme since

this topic related clearly with veteran acculturation and was a prevalent secondary theme in many of the different source types referenced. Reserve/Guard had two source results (3.23%), community college had one source (1.61%), while “Active component”, meaning, personnel currently serving in the military, received a score of zero (0.00%), indicating that no materials dealing primarily with current service personnel situations were reviewed and included. Summary information on these themes is provided in Table 4.

## Discussion

*“He knew how to be a Marine. He hadn’t a clue how a Marine becomes a college student. Neither, it seemed, did anyone else on campus.”* (Marklein, 2007, p. 1).

Change, according to Sander, (2012) at this moment, is the new migration under way from the military to the college campus. More than half a million veterans who served after September 11, 2001, were enrolled in college classes last year under the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill. At issue here is that many veterans do not have even a simple understanding of what they are undertaking. Transition is a process involving step by step change, as researched by Ackerman, et al. (2008). Researchers, administrators, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and advocates must step-in to fill the void in understanding. There is a clear connection for Ackerman, et al. (2008) in that if transition can be understood, the person who is experiencing it can be aided. Yet, there is still much work to be done. Only 22 percent of schools serving student-veterans provide transition assistance (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011).

In order to be successful, student-veterans need to be aware of the process that they are going through and have the resources readily available to assist them (Carnevale, 2006). The challenge is informing those involved of the culture barriers that exist yet, seem to be considered normal, such as the institutional characteristics mentioned by Hanafin (2012). On a more personal level, consideration needs to be given to recommendations by Ackerman, et al. (2008) with regard to mentoring student-veterans. Once veterans begin the transition process and take ownership for their own progress, they may begin to work within the established system to address their own needs. Evidence for this may be the proliferation of student veteran organizations around the country such as the Student Veterans of America, as well as, the establishment of on-campus American Legion Posts at a number of colleges.

Websites with information for OEF/OIF/OND veterans are just another part of the “...current youth culture of fast “fooders, thinkers, and do’ers.”” (Brown, 2009, p.1). Therefore, it would seem appropriate that any discussion of this veteran cohort would need to have some sort of web-based portion. This literature review confirmed that web-based information has been discussed in recent Congressional testimony provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs director, Secretary Shinseki. During questioning by The House Armed Services and Veterans Affairs Committees at the Rayburn Office Building on Wednesday, 25 July 2012, Secretary Shinseki fielded questions on a number of issues, under the topic of; Veterans Returning To Civilian Life. The Secretary noted the advances that had already been made to update on-line systems and acknowledged the need for further improvements (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012).

While publications identified by this literature review clearly denoted evidence of the importance of on-line sources of information for veterans, there is a great deal of variations between the sites and their offerings. For the purpose of this discussion, there are a number of sites represented in the literature review. While some of these sites are designed by veteran organizations others are part of the homepages of educational institutions. What is clear is that there is a need for continuous upgrades and

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enhancements to on-line information for veterans. This medium, which is already a large part of the literature review, will clearly have a significant impact upon how veterans learn and retrieve information just as it has had an impact on society in general.

The G.I. Bill, an educational funding source for military personnel, managed by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, distributed \$1.6-billion in benefits to Montgomery G.I. Bill beneficiaries in 2004. However, the organization does not keep track of veterans' graduation and completion rates for any postsecondary courses of study (Farrell, 2005). While this has only just recently changed, through collaboration between the VA and the Student Veterans of America, this fact illustrates an example of a point made earlier with regard to providing researched-based information on topics of veteran concern. While the benefits themselves are clearly important, what is also important is determining the actual impact that these benefits are having for the veterans themselves not only with degree attainment but also as an integral part of the acculturation process itself by allowing student-veterans to remain enrolled. Simply providing opportunities without following up to determine their effectiveness defeats the purpose of the benefit in the first place. In order to be a positive force in veteran acculturation, G.I. Bill benefits must be reviewed and analyzed for the outcomes that they contribute. To simply sign-off on monies and not issue guidance and support in the form of follow-up reviews is not helping veterans in the long-term.

Veterans, and even officials at the Department of Veterans Affairs, are warning potential enlistees that money for tuition should not be their motivation for joining the U.S. armed forces (Farrell, 2005). This was another facet of the discussion regarding G.I. Bill benefits. One article even mentioned the conversion of military recruiters to a type of college guidance counselor since the primary mechanism for gaining recruits has become the promise of tuition assistance (Carnevale, 2006). While the G.I. Bill has helped many to achieve an education that may have otherwise been out of reach, there needs to be consideration given to the commitment that it takes to earn those benefits and respect given to those that are willing to make those sacrifices.

Uniqueness of student-veterans as a sub-group is partially explained through their experiences as non-traditional students according to Covert (2002). Patrick (2011) reported that few studies specifically address the experiences, successes, or failure of military veterans in higher education. While this sub-theme is important, it did not receive the primary focus in much of the literature for this review. What it did receive, is numerous comments in various sources that dealt with other topics related to the study of veteran acculturation. Clearly, it is an important consideration when understanding the total process that veterans must go through in their transitions from the military to student life. Uniqueness of student-veterans was also a major discussion point on acculturation by Hanafin (2012), as well as, a theme of the research by Frederickson and Schrader (1950).

One final note on the uniqueness of veterans as a culture group, is that while they are a culture that needs to be examined and related to appropriately, quite possibly the best method for doing that, is considering the needs of each individual, as an individual, within that larger group context. While it is instructive to approach veterans as a group to try and relate to some of their needs, the single best way to actually deal with those concerns could be through open and compassionate individualized dialogues. While someone without military or combat experience may not truly be able to relate to a veteran on that level, the attempt to understand their world view and their transition might in many ways facilitate a connection that could bridge differences and maybe promote further growth for both parties.

**Limitations**

While this study identified important themes in the literature regarding student-veteran acculturation, it also includes a number of limitations. First, the search utilized only online library databases. Next, the keywords were limited to veteran and adjustment excluding other possibilities such as; assimilation, reintegration, transition, acculturation, or possibly, even other terms. Until veteran advocates, the Department of Veterans Affairs, researchers, and veterans themselves, determine not only how to accomplish the task of “civilianization” but, how to term it, any review of the subject will be challenged by inconsistency in key terminology.

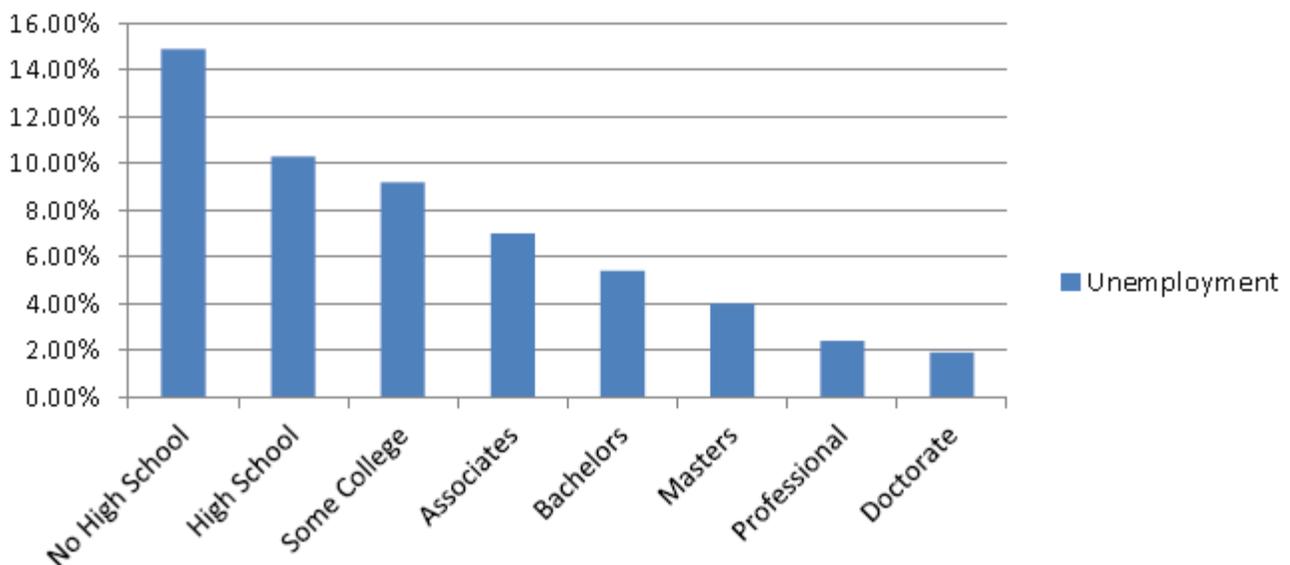
**Conclusion**

*“Sir, I gotta tell you, what I saw was hell.”* (Susman, 2012, p.246)

It remains to be seen whether or not higher education is ready to support re-enrolling veterans. Blevins, Roca, and Spencer (2011) concluded that few evidence-based programs to promote healthy reintegration exist. Veteran, and Pennsylvania Legislator, Murt (2006) commented that reintegration into civilian life will require physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual restoration.

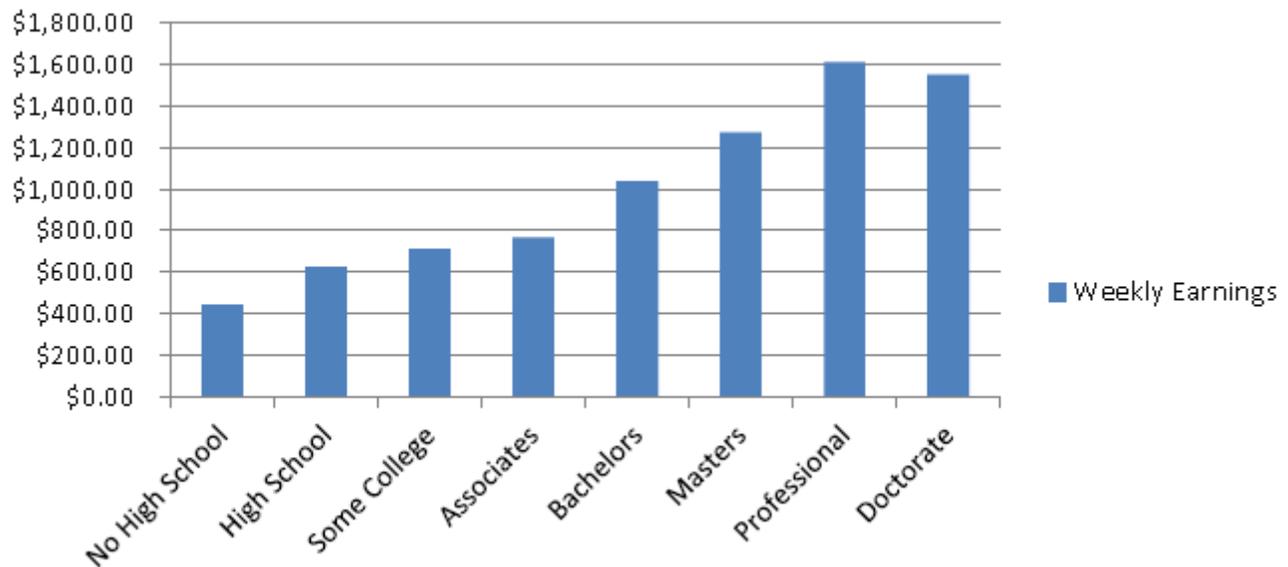
The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that unemployment among young veterans is three times the national average (Quinland, 2008). Beckman, Elbogen, Johnson, Newton, and Wagner (2012) noted that veterans comprise up to 41 percent of the homeless population. However, Patrick (2012) commented that even with the perceived lack of solutions for the above listed needs, a knowledgeable and compassionate veteran liaison on campus may make college a successful venture for military veterans.

The results of this review suggest areas to focus research. In order to account for the individual veteran-specific needs inherent in the acculturation process veterans themselves will need to take the lead. Since a primary facet of military training involves taking initiative in the absence of orders, veterans should be up to the task. Advocates must be prepared as well in order to meet these veterans on their terms, with information regarding the transition process, with quick access to information through accessible technology, and with the funding that will make veteran education possible.



**Figure 1.** Unemployment by education level for all Americans. *Bureau of Labor Statistics*, November, 2011

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**Figure 2.** Weekly earnings by educational level for all Americans. *Bureau of Labor Statistics*, November, 2011

There is no, one-size-fits-all, solution for veteran acculturation to the educational setting. Nor, are there any simple solutions to the other challenges that veterans are currently facing. However, there is a need for continued awareness and improved researched-based methods of identifying services that can best assist this community of learners. The importance of this can be clearly seen illustrated in Figs. 1 and 2. By addressing veteran concerns at the educational institution, it may serve society and the veterans themselves, better, than attempting to assist them once they have fallen through the various safety nets designed to help them acculturate back into mainstream society. Instead of dealing with homelessness and unemployment, by giving veterans the educational tools, as well as, the transitional experience provided by higher education, perhaps, many life outcomes can be improved and a better appreciation for student-veteran transitions through education attained in the process.

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*Asterisk denotes reference obtained through ancestral search.*

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<sup>§</sup> **MICHAEL M. BICHREST** is a member of the 2010 cohort in the Doctorate of Education in Leadership and Learning program at Rivier University. He is currently assisting with research at the National Center for Veterans' Studies at the University of Utah and completing specialization courses in Veterans' Services at Empire State College.