**Bridging the Gap between Student Veterans and Management Education**

**Abstract**

Military students often pursue management majors in college as a natural extension of their prior military background, training, and experiences. However, this unique student population has its own set of support needs when transitioning from military service to college life. Management educators may lack the necessary training, understanding, and awareness to assist military students. In this roundtable session, we will open the floor to session attendees to discuss how management educators can bridge the gap between military service and college for student veterans. We will use three case studies as examples, identify transition challenges, and discuss important support strategies.

*Keywords***:** student veteran, student support, faculty

**Bridging the Gap between Student Veterans and Management Education**

U.S. military veterans are a unique subpopulation that undergo a significant culture shock when transitioning into management degree programs. Unlike traditional students, military veterans bring a wealth of professional training, development, and real-world experiences into the management classroom. Their background and professionalism are often welcomed by faculty, though student veterans can also present distinct challenges that management (and leadership) educators may not be fully prepared to handle. Whether due to lack of education or awareness, management faculty can, at times, become anxious, feel overwhelmed, and even scared to intervene when student veterans are struggling.

The last several years have seen roughly one million servicemembers transition out of the military with many of them returning to the college classroom. During their time in the service, these former servicemembers shared an experience that is unique to any other profession. The military does an exceptional job of ‘breaking down’ civilians and building them back up as servicemembers. Those who serve tend to have a clear understanding of their role, their contribution to the unit and country, and the points of contact in their unit. The training schedule is clear and directions are generally straightforward. Upon leaving the military, a new list of unanticipated challenges arise.

Student veterans often choose to pursue a business degree as a means of aiding their transition into a non-military career. However, transitioning out of the military does not necessarily mean student veterans are no longer influenced by their training, experiences, and the military’s culture. Upon transitioning, veterans report numerous concerns including but not limited to: (1) feeling a lost sense of purpose, (2) losing a sense of camaraderie with coworkers and/or classmates, (3) lost sense of structure/direction, and (4) difficulty connecting with classmates and campus (Kirchner, 2015; Maury, Stone, & Roseman, 2016). At the same time, they may express frustration with the lack of respect seen from their classmates. Instances where classmates show up late to class, fall asleep, play on their phone, talk over the instructor, and forget to complete assignments are considered highly disrespectful by former servicemembers and lead to student veterans feeling further disconnected from the classroom.

Similarly, student veterans are used to clear directions and can become frustrated with ambiguity in assignments. In these instances, student veterans may become visibly upset, more likely to confront the instructor, and more likely to insist on further guidance. For professors with limited knowledge regarding service experiences and military culture, their response in these situations may inadvertently escalate the situation and ultimately leave faculty feeling less receptive to working with student veterans in the future.

**Theoretical Foundation**

Student veterans are non-traditional college students with unique needs (Kirchner, 2015). Each student veteran brings their own service experience, perspective, and concerns into the classroom which can be very different from those of traditional freshmen ([Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1045159515583813#bibr1-1045159515583813); [Washington Department of Veterans Affairs, 2009)](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1045159515583813#bibr42-1045159515583813). In response, educators need to have a good understanding of student veterans’ academic goals and support needs (Kirchner, 2015).

To date, very little research has been published specifically related to the role that management educators can play in bridging the gap for military students who are entering college. However, research does exist about military students and online education (Starr-Glass, 2011), military students as information technology majors (Sadikovich, 2022), and military student initiatives on college campuses (Wilson, 2014). The aforementioned research all points to the fact that military students as a subpopulation have a wide array of pre-college experiences, display unique needs, and may experience transition challenges within the university environment (Kirchner, 2015).

For example, shifting from the structured military environment to a less-structured college setting can be difficult, and student veterans often experience feelings of isolation within a new social network ([Brown & Gross, 2011](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1045159515583813#bibr3-1045159515583813); [DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1045159515583813#bibr7-1045159515583813); [Rumann, Rivera, & Hernandez, 2011](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1045159515583813#bibr30-1045159515583813)). To provide support, faculty need training to learn how to educate student veterans and how to recognize when the student is struggling ([Schnoebelen, 2013](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1045159515583813#bibr32-1045159515583813); [Wallis, 2012](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1045159515583813#bibr41-1045159515583813)). Moreover, student veteran engagement on campus helps them succeed and feel more connected to others and the institution itself (Kirchner, Coryell, Biniecki, 2014). Given that it is a natural fit for military students to choose management and leadership-related majors, and certainly many do, the time is ripe for management educators to explore this important topic.

**Teaching Implications**

This session will add to effective teaching and learning in the field of management by challenging traditional educational approaches to the unique student population that is military students. The specific needs, experiences, and frustrations that this subpopulation can experience transitioning from military service to college life have been primarily overlooked in management education due to an overall lack of awareness; however, we believe the gap that currently exists is ripe for management educators to explore. We will ask questions, critically think about opportunities to engage and support military students, and examine new and innovative ideas for moving forward. We will alsodiscuss the challenges associated with professional development and community-building among military students within the university, and how we, as management educators, can assist students in these areas.

**Session Description**

This roundtable discussion will center around bridging the knowledge gap between student veterans and management and/or leadership faculty and department heads. During the roundtable, the presenters will provide brief introductions before delving into a discussion regarding the predominant issues student veterans experience upon transitioning into management education. Subsequently, session attendees will be introduced to three case study examples that present at least one of the challenges student veterans have previously experienced both inside and outside of the management classroom. In scenario one, faculty will discuss how to navigate a difficult conversation related to a military tragedy where controversial opinions by students may be offensive to student veterans (and others associated with the military). In scenario two, attendees will critique a situation where a student veteran has come to a faculty members’ office to complain about a lack of guidance on assignments which has ultimately impacted their grade. For the third scenario, attendees will analyze a scenario where a student veteran is displaying behaviors that *could* be concerning before discussing response options and corresponding potential consequences. At the end of the roundtable, the presenters will offer a list of the specific strategies to help management faculty support student veterans inside and outside of the classroom.

The presenters have extensive knowledge and experience supporting veteran transitions into degree programs and the college classroom. Presenter one has been conducting research on veteran career transitions since 2013 and served as the veteran resource center director for two years over the past decade. Presenter two has been a professor since 2004, served as graduate program director for more than six years, has advised and taught countless student veterans, and been a department chair since 2022.

*Session Format*

* Introductions and Presenter Background (Five minutes)
* Introduction to student veteran transition issues on campus and in the classroom (ten minutes)
* Three case study discussions based on real life experiences (30 minutes)
* Support strategies available to faculty and department heads (ten minutes)
* Conclusion and Q&A (five minutes)

*Learning Outcomes:*

* Learn the primary transition challenges student veterans face upon entering management and leadership degree programs
* Identify warning signs of student veterans who are struggling
* Develop response tools for navigating difficult situations when working with student veterans
* Learn how management and leadership departments can support student veteran transitions

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