Session Title:

Bridging Veterans and Academia: Enhancing Classroom Environments by Leveraging Student and Faculty Military Service

Abstract:

Student and faculty military veterans bring a wealth of experience, skills, and perspective to academia. However, this wealth often goes untapped. Most literature about veterans is deficit based, giving the impression veterans need to be helped or managed rather than leveraged as resources (Sullivan & Yoon, 2020). This roundtable seeks to highlight the positives veterans bring to academia, be that to the classroom or administration. Together, we will uncover best practices from fellow MOBTS members for engaging veterans, increase our awareness through the experiences of MOBTS veterans, and create a higher standard of care for veterans and non-veterans, alike.

Keywords:

Classroom Leadership, Military Veterans, Teamwork

Session Type:

Roundtable Discussion

Session Preferences:

60 minutes, in-person, preference for a room that allows engaged discussion (moveable tables or circular/half-circle configuration)

Introduction:

Every stage of an academic career represented within MOBTS membership, from doctoral students to seasoned faculty, has military veterans within its ranks. In addition to veterans, there are non-veteran MOBTS members who are actively shaping future military

leaders in their classrooms. Add to this the increase of veterans using the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008, also known as the Post-9/11 GI Bill (Holian & Adam, 2020), and the case can be made for the importance of reinforcing an intentional bridge between veterans and academia.

To build this bridge with the strongest foundation, we must first identify the strengths, common values, and purpose that both veterans and academia share. Unfortunately, with current literature, the strengths of student veterans and what they contribute in higher education is overshadowed by the deficit discourse centered on the challenges veterans face within higher education (e.g., social isolation, post-traumatic stress disorder, disabilities, substance abuse; Sullivan & Yoon, 2020). A search for the positives and strengths faculty veterans bring to the classroom and academia turns up no results. This silence around what veterans offer only allows the noise of veterans' challenges to hamper communication and connection between veterans and academia who, shaped by what is being published, view student and faculty veterans as people who should be managed or helped rather than resources for enhancing learning and classroom growth (Sullivan & Yoon, 2020). With the population of veterans within MOBTS and being aware of MOBTS members who are connected with educating military members and veterans, we can do better. We must do better.

This roundtable is a place for all educators, veterans and non-veterans, to discuss how to identify, highlight, and leverage the tremendous strengths student and faculty veterans offer to academia and our classrooms. We will explore the realities of the student veteran experience as a unique, non-traditional student. In addition, we will discuss ideas for how to best support and engage student veterans, as well as our fellow faculty veterans. Through an open and lively discussion, participants will learn about the experiences and tools other educators use to support,

encourage, and draw on the unique skills of student and faculty veterans. The aim of this roundtable is to reinforce, and in some cases repair, the bridge between academia and veterans through awareness, reflection, and connection. To do this, we will start by drawing on the experiences and knowledge of MOBTS members.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications:

In 2021, over 610,000 veterans, defined as "a person who served in the active military, naval, or air service, and who was discharged or released under conditions other than dishonorable," used military benefits to pursue higher education (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2022, p. 239). Between October 2020 and September 2021, 106,569 veterans started receiving benefits for higher education programs with 70,516 (66.2%) veterans using their benefits for undergraduate programs, 14,167 (13.3%) using their benefits for a graduate program, and 93,387 (71.7%) enrolling in full-time programs (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2022). These numbers are not completely transparent as the Post-9/11 GI bill allows for service members or veterans to transfer their benefits to an eligible child or spouse. In closer analysis, the number of veterans and service members who started personally using their benefits for higher education is 487,449. It is important to note, these numbers do not include veterans who are pursuing higher education via other scholarships or by paying out of pocket. In all, there are over 3.5 million student veterans in higher education (Sullivan & Yoon, 2020).

While these numbers may pale in comparison to the 16,215,756 students who entered undergraduate education in the Fall of 2020 alone (U.S. Department of Education, 2021), veterans offer experiences, insights, and soft skills not often found elsewhere in the student population like leadership, teamwork, discipline, work ethic, organization, follow through, problem solving, resiliency, and sense of duty (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2022a;

Hayes & Hogan, 2021). Student veterans have an increased global awareness, strong communication skills, motivation, maturity, exposure to diversity, flexibility and adaptability, and professionalism (Sullivan & Yoon, 2020; IVMF, 2019; Cox, 2018). Combined, these strengths enable veterans to have unique diversity of thought, experience, and personal characteristics that can encourage growth of all students when the veteran is supported and engaged.

Not only do veterans bring a unique perspective to the classroom, they are unique as a population of non-traditional students. The majority of student veterans are between the ages of 24 and 40, with only 15% of student veterans being traditional college age (18-23; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, n.d.-a). Forty-seven percent of student veterans have children and 47.3% are married, which has shown to negatively impact the time student veterans are able to invest outside of the classroom on activities not essential to the completion of course work (Kim & Cole, 2013). Sixty-two percent of student veterans are first-generation college students (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, n.d.-a). Evident here is the fact that student veterans exist at the intersection of many identities. By going back to school, student veterans must negotiate an additional identity and potential changes to their current identity (Ghosh et al., 2020). These are only two of the challenges student veterans face in order to successfully navigate higher education.

In order to transition into higher education, veterans must also overcome the differing cultures between the military and academia (Sullivan & Yoon, 2020). These cultures can vary in structure, both organizational (military's hierarchical organizational structure versus academia's less defined structure) and routine (military's chain of command and orders versus academia's independent time management (McGee, 2023). Additionally, veterans must overcome the

differing processes for learning (military's highly structured technical learning versus academia's ambiguous learning environment), individual/organizational purposes (military's sense of service to a greater cause versus academia's focus on independent achievement and knowledge creation; Cox, 2018; McGee, 2023), and cultural norms (military's expectation of following orders and respecting rank and formality versus academia's expectation of the independent thinking and informality found in many classrooms; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2020b).

Faculty play an important role in helping veterans overcome these challenges and "transition to academia by assisting veterans to make meaning from their experiences and bridge the different social contexts of home, military, and school" (Sullivan & Yoon, 2020, p. 167). Faculty veterans are ideally positioned because they act as role models and can provide guidance about transitioning from service to academia, as well as act as advocates and interpreters for other faculty regarding military matters (Cox, 2018). To help lessen these challenges, research offers the following suggestions for faculty (Cox, 2018; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, n.d.-b):

- Provide an inclusive classroom environment that is safe and respects student privacy

- Discuss classroom conduct

- Provide coursework and prompts for potentially distressing content (e.g., combat war videos, loud noises, sudden movements) early to allow for pre-screening or skimming of material

- Encourage peer interactions through discussion and group work

- Clearly communicate expectations and assignments in a direct manner with specific goals

- Be sensitive of political statements, be that in the classroom or on campus (e.g., protests)

- Be aware of important dates – public anniversary dates (e.g., Memorial Day, Veterans Day) and private dates (e.g., deployment dates, death of a military friend)

While these are certainly important, what do they look like in practice? Given the majority of student veterans study business management (IVMF, 2019; Student Veterans of America, 2017), MOBTS members are perfectly positioned to positively impact the educational experience of a large number of student veterans, while leveraging their unique strengths to enhance learning for all. Through open dialogue with student and faculty veterans, as well as those who have worked with veterans, this roundtable stands to create a higher standard of care and support for veteran and non-veteran students alike.

Session Description:

This 60-minute roundtable discussion seeks to bridge academia and veterans, be that student or faculty, in a way that will enhance classroom environments for all. The aim is to enhance participants' awareness, understanding, and skillsets, enabling them to leverage faculty and student military service for future educational benefits.

After a short introduction to the roundtable topic and research summary, participants will be asked to contribute their knowledge and experiences of working with student veterans or of being a veteran in academia, highlighting what they have done to draw out the best in the veterans/themselves. The conversation will be facilitated in a way that creates key takeaways (e.g., new/changed behaviors, perspective, exercises) participants can utilize in their classroom to enhance student learning, engagement, and satisfaction, as well as faculty effectiveness.

Proposed timeline:

- (10 minutes) Welcome and roundtable overview
- (40 minutes) Facilitated discussion

- (10 minutes) Summary, capture of key takeaways, and session conclusion

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