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Veterans in the Writing Classroom: Three Programmatic Approaches to Facilitate the Transition from the Military to Higher Education

Drawing upon a two-year study of student-veterans in college writing classrooms, this article analyzes three types of courses developed in an effort to respond to increased military-affiliated student enrollments: veterans-only, veteran-focused, and veteran-friendly. The article concludes with recommendations for an asset-based approach to professional development for writing faculty.

The purpose of this article is to report on institutional approaches to veteran enrollments in writing classes and to recommend a reorientation of those approaches toward asset-based professional orientation and course development. These recommendations derive from the findings of a 2010 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Research Initiative Grant that funded a two-year study of student veterans in the writing classroom.

Since at least 2003, the CCCC has made public comment on US military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹ Subsequently, veteran populations—

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particularly those from Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) who are taking advantage of the generous benefits of the Post-9/11 GI Bill—have surged on college campuses, with over one million veterans and eligible family members using these benefits since 2009 (“One Million”). A spike of veteran enrollments in core courses such as first-year writing (FYW) has followed.² Because FYW courses are typically small enough for students to interact one-on-one with their instructors and to collaborate with their classmates,³ and because expressive and reflective writing theories shape many first-year students’ writing experiences,⁴ writing classes often function as a transitional space between veterans’ military experiences and their college experiences.

Current Landscape

Sue Doe and William Doe have termed this transitional time for service members *residence time*, which they describe as the amount of time it takes for a person to become fully acclimated to a new environment, and they call on the concept of *induction* as the process by which veterans transition into residence time (“Residence”). For Doe and Doe, veterans, in moving from military life to civilian life, may experience a more extended period of induction than during their original transition into the military, and so the goal of educators should be, at least in part, to reduce the length of residence time through close attention to the varied literacies of military service members.

Residence time provides a useful framework for engaging with veterans on college campuses in that it emphasizes the sometimes dramatic transitions veterans undergo. While we would emphasize that not every institution or writing program will be affected by a veteran surge, we nonetheless urge writing program administrators (WPAs) to investigate veteran enrollments on their campuses to determine the degree to which these transitions may be taking place in their classrooms. Such a task is not easy. Very few colleges, if any, disclose veteran status to faculty,⁵ so instructors often only become aware through veterans’ self-disclosure as a result of classroom discussion, one-to-one conferences, informal or formal writing assignments, or, in some cases, discussion of accommodation for disability.⁶ Absent such self-disclosure, many student-veterans remain invisible, especially in classes populated by other adult learners.

Nonetheless, the number of veterans entering our classrooms continues to climb. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) reports that the US veteran population is nearing twenty-two million people, with one million from the current wars now enrolled in colleges and universities (*2015 Veteran* 18–19). That constitutes nearly 4 percent of students nationwide, though in some geographical locations that percentage is much higher. Further, estimated enrollments reflect only those students receiving GI Bill benefits, and no study has produced reliable data on the number of veterans seeking college degrees after their benefits have lapsed, have been transferred to a family member, or have otherwise remained unused.⁷ Reflecting the rapid growth of veterans on college campuses, the national Student Veterans Association (SVA) has seen the number of its campus chapters multiply exponentially, from fewer than 50 before 2010 to 950 in fall 2014, with membership doubling from 2013 to 2014 alone (Romney). In 2014, SVA reported that just over half of all veterans who enroll in degree programs receive degrees, a number close to the traditional college population and significantly above the more-comparable “nontraditional” student body, whose graduation rates linger around 40 percent. The overwhelming majority—nearly 80 percent—of student-veterans enroll in public institutions (Cate), and the largest number of graduates in the SVA study sought degrees in the liberal arts and sciences. Both the SVA and the VA estimate that growth in student-veteran enrollments will continue in the short term.

The fact that the current GI Bill affords educational opportunities to family members of veterans will also ensure ongoing military-affiliated student enrollment growth (“Transfer”). The implications of shared benefits are far-reaching. First, it reminds us that our classrooms contain not only veterans but also spouses and children of veterans. In communities with high numbers of National Guard members or reservists, this may be especially true, as those veteran populations tend to be older and often already have families and grown children. Additionally, the extension of educational benefits to family members means those who have been deeply connected to OIF and OEF will continue to fill in our classrooms for generations.⁸ Military dependents—many of whom will have been significantly impacted by the length and severity of two concurrent wars⁹—will enroll in college up to two decades from now, and as ample research testifies, they will be bringing with them the generational costs of war.¹⁰

The impact of military service on both veterans and their family members suggests that WPAs have a special need to identify and understand the student-veteran populations on their campuses. Several strategies may help determine whether special outreach for veterans or military family members is necessary. Discussing veteran enrollments with the staff of a campus veterans resource center or with a school's certifying official¹¹ will provide an initial sense of how many veterans or military family members are on campus. Further, making contact with a veterans' student group can offer insight into the student-veteran identity on a particular campus. Finally, reviewing and discussing institutional recruitment initiatives with senior administrators can be especially helpful in anticipating potential future enrollment trends. Many schools have very active recruitment initiatives to encourage veteran enrollments,¹² and while the motivations for such recruitment have been the subject of significant speculation (and even congressional testimony), reviewing and understanding campus initiatives can aid WPAs in determining the likelihood that the effects of military service may find their way into writing classrooms.

For many schools, that likelihood is slim. Private, four-year institutions as a group enroll far fewer veterans than state institutions despite a provision of the Post-9/11 GI Bill that encourages broad enrollments.¹³ The Yellow Ribbon Program "allows approved institutions of higher learning and the VA to partially or fully fund tuition and fee expenses that exceed the established thresholds under the Post-9/11 GI Bill" ("Post-9/11") for those student-veterans who have earned 100 percent benefits eligibility by funding the difference between the maximum benefit allowed to veterans under the GI Bill and the private school tuition.¹⁴

Public four-year institutions enroll veterans in greater numbers than do private institutions, but their numbers are still lower than those of community colleges. As Kelly Field reports, "Many veterans prefer community colleges and for-profit institutions because they are more convenient and cater to their needs. . . . The majority of veterans today use their GI benefits to attend institutions that offer two-year degrees or emphasize vocational training." The SVA Million Records Project indicates that roughly 35 percent of veterans initially earn an associate's degree—the largest percentage

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of degrees earned by veterans (Cate), likely because the student-veteran demographic parallels other adult populations. The American Council on Education (ACE) indicates that the average student-veteran is thirty-three years old, more than ten years older than the nonveteran-student average of twenty-two (“Veteran Students”), and as a result, they often seek community colleges with programs designed to balance academics, work, and family.¹⁵

Unlike traditional students, who, as Caroline Bird suggested during the post-Vietnam surge, frequently attend college “because it has become the thing to do or because college is a pleasant place to be; because it’s the only way they can get parents or taxpayers to support them without getting a job they don’t like,” student-veterans expect institutions of higher education to be more than “a social center or aging vat.” Instead, many seek accelerated entry into a productive and sustainable economic life, and community colleges and vocational and technical schools are often viewed as the most efficient way to get there. In addition, for student-veterans who are initially uncertain about how successful they may be academically, earning an associate’s degree can give them the confidence to continue to a bachelor’s degree.¹⁶ Well-established articulation agreements between many state two-year and four-year colleges make such transfers particularly viable options.¹⁷

The varied reasons for and paths by which veterans seek college degrees, however, should not obscure the larger story that many institutions with diverse student bodies are experiencing substantial veteran enrollments. In fact, military undergraduates represent “a significant minority population on college and university campuses” (Bonar and Domenici 205). In addition, these students are often undertaking a fundamental shift in identity—from military to civilian, from professional soldier/airman/sailor/marine to student. Those points of transition provide rich opportunities for writing and writing instruction and as such were at the heart of many of the inquiries we made while conducting our research.¹⁸

A Brief Statement on Methodology

We have discussed our methodology for the CCCC Research Grant in detail elsewhere (see Hart and Thompson, “Ethical”), but before exploring our key findings, we highlight some of our methodological approaches. As an initial step for our work, we conducted a national survey of writing instructors. We collected more than four hundred survey responses, processed some

results at the inaugural Dartmouth Summer Seminar for Composition Research, and, using grant funding, conducted follow-up site visits at forty university and college campuses. Our site visits were determined by two factors: density of veteran populations (the top four states for veteran populations are California, Texas, Florida, and Virginia) and institutions whose work with veterans emerged from the survey as especially noteworthy. While we did not in our data collection and do not

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here aim to be exhaustive in describing trends across the country, we identified

one major development across many institutions: the expansion of classes explicitly for veterans.

Across the country generally three types of courses have been created to account for increases in military student populations: *veterans-only courses, veteran-focused courses, and veteran-friendly courses*. We provide below a taxonomy of these classes. While we focused our research on writing classrooms, these classifications also appear regularly in other disciplines and college orientation courses. Here, we trace the constituent parts of each category, but we also discuss governing assumptions behind each model and some of the theoretical architecture that supports those assumptions.

We draw special attention to the fact that implementation of classes oriented to military audiences requires significant intellectual engagement with “the veteran” as a cultural trope or stereotype (see Vacchi). Our culture has been saturated with the rhetoric of war for over a decade, forcing us to formulate our own positions not only about the wars but also about those who fight them. Confronting those positions, which are often forged in moments of intense emotion, is necessary to move ourselves and our classrooms beyond the essentializing language of the “hero,” the “wounded warrior,” the “war criminal,” or other convenient categorizations.¹⁹ Our hope is that, much as we observed on campuses where new courses for veterans were being offered, the categories of classes we describe will foster more nuanced exploration of the connections between military service and academic inquiry.

Veterans-Only Courses

A sense of alienation among student-veterans is well-documented (see, e.g.,

DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell; Elliot, Gonzalez, and Larsen; Glasser, Powers, and Zywiak; Livingston et al.), and the first category of classes we describe—veterans-only classes—aim to remedy this estrangement by restricting course enrollment to veterans or members of the military. Such classes recognize the challenges that service-members have in transitioning from military to civilian life, and they attempt to ease that transition by ensuring that student-veterans are surrounded by peers who understand military culture and the wartime experience (see also Valentino, “*Serving*”).

For veterans, a sense of “difference” can be heightened when they encounter student lives that seem fundamentally disconnected from their own lived experiences. In many of our interviews with students and faculty, the image of privileged undergraduate students who talk incessantly about their social lives emerged as a kind of trope, a stereotype against which many veterans positioned themselves. The stereotype served, in the veterans’ minds, as evidence of the fundamental differences between the student-veteran, who matured and was professionalized in a military (and often international) setting, and the “typical undergraduate,” whose concerns focus on dating, alcohol, and parties.

Because (as Janet Lucas reminds us) the writing classroom is a space where disclosures of life’s personal details often emerge, this sense of difference can be exacerbated. Even in instances when instructors may try to avoid prompting such disclosures, the use of experience as a type of evidence or as an organizing principle of a piece of writing may still lead to disclosure of a veteran’s status. We note that even an assignment as seemingly innocuous as a “how-to” assignment may unexpectedly reveal military experience. Writing professors who explicitly assign personal narratives increase such opportunities. In fact, our research suggests that, regardless of course goals, some form of personal narrative remains a mainstay of many composition classes.²⁰ Thus, the possibility that any particular student will disclose personal information that either his or her classmates, the instructor, or even the student himself or herself finds difficult to negotiate increases. For veterans, who already report a higher sense of alienation, personal writing may exacerbate those feelings, especially if their professors, like Melanie Burdick so openly discusses, find themselves unready for war stories and “afraid to respond” (354). Therefore, “the question becomes how to respond thoughtfully, intelligently, and professionally to these disclosures” (Lucas 368).

Veterans-only classes partially mitigate this issue because, on the one hand, faculty leading the class have typically received special preparation and, on the other hand, students share, at least broadly, a military context that can provide common touchstones for discussion and support. The model mirrors similar courses that have developed to aid other populations in higher education. Just as ESL or developmental writing sections of FYW seek to adapt shared learning objectives by acknowledging a need within the student population, so too do veterans-only writing courses. First popularized through the Supportive Education for Returning Veterans (SERV) program at Cleveland State University, initiated by chemistry professor John Schupp, the typical veterans-only course aims to provide a safe learning environment for veterans who may feel distracted or anxious in classes containing students without military backgrounds. Schupp believes that veterans-only classes allow students to focus on their educational goals while finding support among peers, and his program received significant media attention for its innovative approach to helping veterans in postsecondary education. These classes help students establish a sense of “unit cohesion” that allows them to focus more directly on the “mission” of class (Stripling). Such courses become “like the VFW hall without the alcohol,” spaces where veterans “can talk about problems they may have, whether it’s educational or personal” (Hall 8).

Several institutions have piloted veterans-only writing courses. An instructor at a community college in a large state with a significant military population created a veterans-only class that received national exposure in part because it recognized that the strong sense of camaraderie that service members feel while in the military could be harnessed as part of a writing class. As such, the initial class included trips to ropes courses and white-water rafting to help create a strong learning cohort. The second semester the course was offered built on the lessons from the first and provided a shared reading experience on the subject of war. The course enjoyed significant success, but by the third semester it was offered, the instructor began to shift the focus away from the students’ military experience because they found ongoing discussion about aspects of service and war at times frustrating and tedious. As a result, the instructor modified the course to focus on education and the college experience.

One professor at a regional comprehensive university in close proximity to a military base launched a veterans learning community as part of her

institution's introductory composition sequence. While debate about the desirability of the course emerged from discussions with student-veterans, they nonetheless supported the pilot, which included service members from all the different branches. The approach was to provide "a space where if you want to write about service, it's a safe space," and while students reported some resistance to the writing process and to the "book learning" nature of the college setting, the instructor noted their ongoing strong sense of motivation and initiative.

Despite the many benefits reported from courses like the ones described above, they nonetheless present significant challenges, some pragmatic and some ethical. While the first institution discussed above continues to offer the veterans learning community FYW course in conjunction with a personal development course, the veterans-only course sequence at the latter institution was canceled in subsequent semesters, despite its relative success in achieving its goals. At Cleveland State, the Veterans Student Success Program website shows that 2010 was the last year "SERV-only" English courses were offered, and an *Inside Higher Ed* article in 2012 reported that Cleveland State had discontinued the SERV program entirely; a similar program at Ohio State was also discontinued (Grasgreen).

The relatively short history of veterans-only classes demonstrates that their viability often rests on issues of "logistics and demand": on the one hand, a class that is consistently under-enrolled becomes unsustainable and a drain on limited resources, while on the other hand, "a model based on one-on-one interactions and exceptionally small class sizes (which have to fit into everyone's schedules) can only reach so many people" (Grasgreen), so staffing veterans-only courses that are experiencing exceptionally high demand is often not feasible either. Further, in some cases, student-veterans are not interested in taking courses that deliberately separate them from their civilian counterparts because they are seeking opportunities to reintegrate into a nonmilitary community. As one veterans' coordinator explained, "isolating veterans from the rest of the population is not necessarily positive. . . . [T]he worst thing we [can] do is continue to isolate them from that immersion and that process" or reinforce "reclusive-veteran stereotypes" (Grasgreen). In other cases, some student-veterans choose not to sign up for the veterans-only designated sections because they feel their need or desire to be around other veterans is less acute than some of their "battle buddies," so they don't sign up in order to allow others with a

perceived greater need to do so. A concern that veterans-only classes might be stigmatized as “remedial” is another apprehension some veterans voice.

Institutions offering veterans-only courses have recognized that providing professional development opportunities to faculty to ensure clarity of purpose is crucial. While the impulse of an instructor to teach a veterans-only course may be well meaning, doing so without a keen sense of

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the varied motives for military service and the complexity of the many different kinds of professional work service in which members have engaged can lead to profound assumptions and misconceptions about the students

in the class. For instance, notorious cultural divides exist between different branches of the military, and those divides may find their way into the classroom. Army veterans may, for reasons that have nothing to do with collegiate life, dismiss contributions to the course by navy veterans. Even deeper schisms often exist between ranks or, perhaps most poignantly, between combat veterans and noncombat veterans (though those lines are increasingly blurry). It is worth noting that the 2010 Department of Veterans Affairs National Survey of Veterans found that of veterans from all eras “34 percent . . . reported that they had served in combat or a war zone” (“National”); the number is notably higher for post-9/11 veterans, with “60% [being] deployed to a combat zone” (Taylor). Yet our vision of the student-veteran experience likely includes combat. Such visions, however, are contrary to the actualities: many service members will never have been deployed to a foreign country, and among those who have, many will not have served in an active war zone, let alone engaged in direct combat. Certainly, service members working in a military at war will and do feel the effects of those wars—even those working in an office in the Pentagon or a missile silo in Wyoming are immersed in a culture of war—but the figure of the combat-hardened (male) soldier or marine that occupies a central place in our imaginations has displaced the realities of a very large, complex, and diverse military force.²¹ Instructors without knowledge of this complexity, or at least sensitivity to it, not only undermine their own credibility but also jeopardize the possibility of fashioning a safe zone for student-veterans that, as noted earlier, is the very purpose of most veterans-only classes.

Further, we would point out that the governing assumption of most of

veterans-only classes is that veterans are in need of some sort of buffer from the rest of the student body. Indeed, such classes are predicated on students' deficits, most often characterized by diagnostic medical and psychological language. When courses' starting points are the presumption of need for rehabilitation or, more simply, protection, broader educational goals can be sacrificed. Later in our argument, we recommend an asset-based approach that reorients class creation away from an underlying vision of veterans as deficient and toward a vision of veterans as students with notable assets.

Veteran-Focused Courses

Some institutions have responded to (or even anticipated) the enrollment challenges and pedagogical hurdles that veterans-only classes pose, and one resulting strategy has been to form courses that take the veteran or the military as their subject without limiting enrollment to veterans. These classes target service members, their families, or others affected by war, and while enrollment is not limited to those particular students, their presumed interests and anticipated engagement are central motivations for such courses.

Publication of a wide range of teaching materials that engage with issues of war has facilitated the development of these courses. For example, OIF army infantryman Alex Horton's essay "On Getting By: Advice for College-Bound Vets" has been anthologized in one of Norton's FYW readers, and Jena McGregor's essay "Military Women in Combat: Why Making It Official Matters" appears in Bedford's bestselling FYW anthology *Current Issues and Enduring Questions*, which also includes a complete chapter titled "Service: A Duty? A Benefit? Or Both, or Perhaps Neither?" Accordingly, faculty have created syllabi with sequences focused on the wars or some aspect of them. For example, torture became a common topic for student writing after Abu-Ghraib, as did the issue of the draft, military recruitment on college campuses, the idea of a "just war," and similar topics.

Course sequences and lessons on these topics, however, are not precisely what we mean by veteran-focused courses. By *veteran-focused*, we mean those courses whose genesis or revision stem from the attempt to address within a curriculum the needs of veterans, military family members, or others affected by military action. They are courses in which faculty members arrange course materials and activities by focusing on the needs of the veteran population in order to recruit veterans to the course.

Veteran-focused courses envision veterans as the primary audience for the course, and engagement with materials about war functions, in part, to attract students with a particular experience or interest in the military, combat, or the effects of war. The faculty teaching veteran-focused classes

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may also attempt to address the needs of student-veterans by crafting what they regard as especially relevant writing assignments for these students.²²

The veteran-focused classroom provides a meaningful learning environment for veterans because it rests on a deliberate attempt to understand the values of the student-veteran population and, often, their family members. Those needs may be quite straightforward. They may include providing students with options on writing assignments so that they can choose whether or not to disclose their veteran status, providing students with options on seating within a classroom, providing accommodations for out-of-classroom responsibilities (such as work, reserve or National Guard duty, medical appointments, or family obligations), or providing options on readings or film viewings for veterans who find particular texts or images difficult to endure.²³ Further, faculty development on how to handle the complexities of the wartime experience helps ensure the classroom remains a safe place for intellectual curiosity. For example, helping faculty negotiate the issue of combat casualties may require extensive support or, more subtly, helping faculty understand that even seemingly supportive statements such as “I could never imagine what you’ve been through” may result, as Phil Klay notes, in the veteran feeling “in a corner by himself [*sic*], able to proclaim about war but not discuss it,” while simultaneously shutting out the civilian “from a conversation about one of the most morally fraught activities our nation engages in—war.”

For those considering a veteran-focused course, then, we suggest that it be developed in coordination with other stakeholders in veterans’ issues on campus. The image we have of the “veteran” may bear very little resemblance to the actual veterans on a particular campus, so identifying local campus trends in veteran demographics is crucial. Some campuses, for example, may have primarily air force veterans, others primarily marines. Some campuses may have a veteran population concentrated in an MBA

program, whereas others may be concentrated in undergraduate offerings in international studies, engineering, or social work. Some campuses may have a high concentration of combat veterans, whereas others may have a high concentration of support personnel. Some campuses may have a rich tradition of veterans of foreign militaries on the campus, or they may have an unusually high concentration of female veterans, or a large number of military dependents. Understanding these distinctions and others provides a foundation for crafting intentional courses.²⁴

Often, veteran services offices have demographic information that can be useful, but simply opening discussions within a writing department or program is important to ensure a clear understanding of the student-veteran population on campus. In other words, forming a veteran-focused class requires nuanced understanding of the veterans on a campus and in a community. Without such an understanding, the goal of recruiting veterans and their dependents for a class will likely result in some of the same issues that veterans-only courses seem to face: inconsistent enrollments, lack of ability to staff under-enrolled classes, and inability to create courses that engage veterans in meaningful ways.

Veteran-Friendly Courses

Darren Keast at the City College of San Francisco has recently written about developing a veteran-friendly writing course, and we would suggest that his model provides an avenue for creating the “safe space” that the veterans-only course attempts to provide while also mitigating the pragmatic problems, such as staff resource allocation and student enrollment, that recur in both veterans-only and veteran-focused courses. By the designation *veteran-friendly*, Keast means simply a course that, in its preparation and execution, is mindful of the veteran presence on a campus and in a classroom. It does not limit enrollments, nor does it imply a special focus of the coursework or audience for the class. Instead, the course instructor recognizes the particular strengths and challenges veteran and active duty service members may bring to a classroom and campus, and those strengths and challenges become a measure by which the instructor organizes class material, activities, and assignments.

Keast’s syllabus and accompanying reflection on his process for creating and running the course provide a useful roadmap for instructors. We would draw attention to two particular aspects of his work. First,

Keast envisions his course as mitigating the sense of alienation veterans experience in a university setting while simultaneously providing civilians with “public forums to discuss moral issues related to these wars.” Keast emphasizes that a veteran-friendly class provides veterans, as one student reported, “street cred” in the academic exchange of the class, but that the goals of research and careful argumentation require students to engage with topics beyond personal experience alone. Secondly, while Keast indicates that his course is “themed,” he maintains a focus on his institutional and departmental composition outcomes. The result is that he ultimately sees veterans in much the same way as other students. As he says in the closing of his article: “Veterans and civilian students, from what I can tell from my anecdotal experience with their work, have essentially the same needs as writers.” Instead of a veteran-focused class, then, a veteran-friendly class is one whose “primary goal . . . is to create a space broad enough for students with a wide range of experiences and predilections to write essays that engage and challenge them and are informed by careful research.” The class, Keast hopes, will “bridge the civilian-military gap that many critics have observed.”

Keast’s classroom, therefore, is a conscious attempt to bridge a cultural divide within the context of a writing classroom, and it does so by mitigating one of the central concerns of veterans-only classes. That concern is perhaps best articulated by Matt Gallagher, the author of the critically acclaimed Iraq memoir *Kaboom*. Gallagher argues that veterans-only writing workshops, for all their promise and good intentions, might fail to accomplish one of their primary (often unstated) goals, which is to help veterans more easily join new communities and to ease their transition from the military to civilian life. Gallagher observes that for all the benefits of veterans-only writing workshops, the exclusive nature of them “reinforce[s] an ugly undercurrent of thought in military writing—that one shouldn’t write about war unless one participated in it as a combatant or otherwise survived its destruction.” Gallagher argues that for veteran writing workshops to work, “they [need] to stress the writing part over the veteran part,” and while his position focuses on creative writing, his final words point to what much of our research identifies as well, which is that “inclusion” should start with a broad-minded approach of how “to involve talented, driven people” in giving voice to complex issues.

From our perspective, then, the veteran-friendly class model offers the most viable opportunity for many schools to address veteran enrollments in writing classes. On the one hand, such courses recognize veterans as a group with particular strengths and challenges that recur with some regularity across institutions, and, on the other hand, these courses provide a means of, to invoke military language, remobilization that allows student-veterans more transparency in making their educational decisions. Whereas even a veteran-focused class relies on the notion of the “veteran” to animate the course material (effectively asking veterans to participate in the class *as veterans*), the veteran-friendly class acknowledges without demand the role that the veteran identity may have played in shaping a sense of self while the student negotiates new roles as civilian and student. The classroom becomes a space where both the veteran identity and the student identity can be honored and performed.

An Asset-Based Approach to the Question of Faculty Development

Throughout our research, we repeatedly encountered anxiety among WPAs or veteran services staff over the need for professional development about veterans on campus. The sense was that forcing (or even inviting) faculty to be prepared for “yet another special interest group” would create more work for those conducting the professional development as well as resentment among those receiving it. Such concerns are not groundless, as overburdened faculty and staff may question the need for more training: “Why add more professional development workshops?”

We submit three answers to this question. The first is that for many programs, specialized professional development on veterans’ issues is unnecessary. WPAs and writing faculty should base their decisions on relevant data collected on their local campuses. Thoughtful questions provide avenues for gathering that data:

How many veterans are on campus (not just how many are receiving educational benefits)?

How many are undergraduate students? Transfer students? Graduate students?

How many are veterans of the US military? Other countries’ militaries?

Is the campus near a military site or in a community with a historical military presence?

How many dependents of service members and veterans are likely to be on campus?

What professional development is already being conducted by a veterans coordinator or service office?

Is there a Student Veterans Association?

Is there an ROTC presence?

These kinds of questions can help WPAs shape a local response to the national student-veteran surge, and while we do not believe every campus will need to formulate a response, we maintain that program administrators in core fields such as writing have, in Marilyn Valentino's words, an "ethical obligation" to investigate and determine the level of need ("CCCC Chair's Address").

Secondly, when professional development is appropriate, we recommend an asset-based model. According to a report prepared by Drew Lieberman and Kathryn Stewart for Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, presenting post-9/11 veterans in an "asset" frame "produces an even better [perception] than portraying veterans as heroic. It also begins to reorient the way people think about how best to 'thank' veterans returning from service by shifting the focus from charity [or accommodation] to opportunity" (Lieberman and Stewart).²⁵ However, virtually every professional development module or program we encountered focused on veteran "deficits": PTSD, TBI, trauma, lack of preparedness for college, absenteeism, disability, substance abuse, gender discrimination, sexual assault, transition issues. Such a deficit-based approach, we suggest, creates "a priori expectations about a student," which, as Eugenia L. Weiss explains, "can lead an educator to treat the student differently and in accord with those expectations." As a result, "students are likely to respond accordingly, regardless of their intellectual ability" (Weiss 120). While the effects of military service during a time of active warfare are real and may require significant interventions,²⁶ they do not exclusively or even primarily constitute the student-veteran experience. As Pamela Woll makes clear, "the subject of war and its effects can easily tip over into a dramatic focus on the negative or a stereotypical portrait of service members and veterans as dangerous, unstable, or objects

of sympathy. The best focus will emphasize respect for these individuals . . . and belief in their strength and potential” (24). Indeed, our research affirms what other studies demonstrate: veterans tend to be an asset to the classroom. Many bring broad worldviews to complex issues, and all members of the military receive extensive training in leadership and team building. Further, promotion within the military is often linked to education and professional development, so that veterans’ capacity for learning per se is less of a hurdle than is the need for them to learn to apply already well-developed learning processes to the relatively unfamiliar learning environment of the college classroom. Therefore, when faculty approach veterans as experts in their own fields—as highly trained professionals seeking to become proficient in new ways of knowing and learning—the significant assets of military students can strengthen classroom dynamics. In his 2014 op-ed, Mark Street points out that “in an academic community we are all there to question our own assumptions, to be surprised, and to be willing to let another’s viewpoint or reaction challenge our own,” which is why he appreciates how student-veterans “enliven [his] classes . . . day to day.” Erin Hadlock and Sue Doe also call attention to student veterans’ “aptitude, agency, and critical thinking, all of which situate them to thrive in higher-education settings” (74). Among our interviewees, one of the most repeated sentiments was that faculty highly valued student-veterans because of their professionalism, motivation, varied experiences, and maturity.

Emphasizing assets is at the heart of our third and final recommendation: WPAs should consider asset-based pedagogical research for any professional development. Such research traditionally centers on issues of educational justice in K–12 schools. As Django Paris and H. Samy Alim explain, “the vast majority of asset pedagogy research and practice has focused on the racialized and culturally situated heritage practices of [Indigenous American and African American] communities” (90). While we do not mean to suggest that the culturally situated practices of (former) military members are equivalent to the culturally situated heritage practices of marginalized student populations such as Indigenous Americans and African Americans, we concur with Lew Zipin that teaching and learning become more difficult when “learners’ culturally inherited ways of knowing do not match those privileged in school curriculum” (317). For student-veterans, this may mean a shift from action- and mission-oriented training to less immediately concrete educational objectives. As Angie Mallory and

Doug Downs note in their chapter in the collection *Generation Vet*, student-veterans typically “do not cast [their military habits] aside. For example, every veteran [they] interviewed reported following the military script of showing up to a scheduled event (class) fifteen minutes early—to find no one else there” (61). Other student-veterans shared with Mallory and Downs their initial dismay at what they perceived to be slovenliness in the dressing habits or physical postures of their professors and fellow classmates,²⁷ or the apparent lack of respect students demonstrated by calling a professor by his first name. These elements of academic culture can be unsettling to student-veterans. By making an effort to “design curriculum that makes meaningful connections with ways of knowing in learners’ lives beyond school, . . . that is, to become open to learning about and from the lives of others, with conviction that these lives embody both intelligence and knowledge assets,” writing instructors can potentially create a “more egalitarian, democratic and intellectually rich curriculum that puts diverse lifeworld learning assets to use” (Zipin 317–19). In asset-based frameworks, like that proposed by John Saltmarsh, “student’s assets are embraced because the experience and knowledge they contribute to the learning process, and the authority of the knowledge they possess, contribute necessarily to the construction of new knowledge” (342). As former marine and current college writing instructor Galen Leonhardy reminds us, “we have much to learn” from student veterans (342).

Corrine Hinton’s research on US Marine Corps student-veterans shows that those “who [are] able to identify and then translate previous learning and rhetorical experiences from the military into academic writing contexts [are more likely to report] positive perceptions about that writing,” and Cathleen Morreale similarly argues that “the educational quality of military students can be improved through the development of socio-educational relationships . . . such as recognizing a student’s knowledge by having them provide spontaneous accounts, presenting alternative versions of arguments, engaging various participants holding contradictory opinions, [and] building arguments collectively through work in small groups” (138). By setting aside preconceptions and guiding student-veterans to recognize similarities between academic writing and military writing, we help them “identify and unpack the kinds of action agency that were valued in the military and compare these to the kinds of learning and writing agency that will be needed in college classrooms” (Hadlock and Doe 90).

This is all to say that veterans' lived experiences promise to help shape classroom discussions, and their professional writing experiences stand to enrich students' considerations of various academic and non-academic literacies. Prompting dialogue about what helps veterans on a particular campus learn better will, we believe, prompt greater engagement with different ways of knowing and seeing the world, and such epistemological discussions may consequently help transform our ways of approaching our writing classrooms. Acknowledging student-veterans' needs while also recognizing their assets not only helps us enact good pedagogy, but it is at the very heart of the veteran ethos: service. In this case, to our students.

This is all to say that veterans' lived experiences promise to help shape classroom discussions, and their professional writing experiences stand to enrich students' considerations of various academic and non-academic literacies.

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Notes

1. See Resolution 3 of the Executive Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Annual Business Meeting, 22 Mar. 2003, New York.
2. In our 2010 survey of WPAs and writing instructors, 44.2 percent of respondents (some of whom represent the same institutions) stated that they had noticed an increase of student-veterans in their writing classes.
3. In the same survey, 62.3 percent of respondents stated that their FYW classes are capped at between 20 and 25 students, while 23.8 percent had caps between 15 and 20 students. Only 10.8 percent of respondents had caps of more than 25. We also want to note here that we deliberately used the term *classmates* rather than *peers*, as many student-veterans would not identify their classmates as their peers due to differences in age and experience.

4. In the same survey, 71 percent of respondents indicated that FYW classes at their institutions “typically include assignments of personal narrative essays.” Similarly, 69.5 percent of respondents concurred that some form of “journals” are assigned in FYW.

5. During our research, we learned that during the Vietnam era, faculty members at some institutions were provided with class rosters that *did* indicate which, if any, of their students were receiving educational benefits from the military. According to our sources, this practice was instituted in order to “catch” veterans who were cashing in on their benefits without actually attending classes or working toward degree completion. A 1978 article in the *Atlantic* points out that “by 1977, only 30 percent of the Vietnam-era veterans without a high school education had used any part of their GI Bill benefits. And, of course, there [was] no way of telling how many Vietnam veterans [used] the Bill [which was distributed in monthly lump sum payments to cover tuition only], not primarily to go to school and learn a trade, but to get cash and keep themselves and their families in food” (Kidder).

6. While we don’t want to downplay the significant impact of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injury (TBI)—the “signature wounds” of the most recent wars—we also want to make it clear that according to the Pew Research Center’s 2011 report *War and Sacrifice in the Post-9/11 Era*, the Veterans Administration (VA) has stated that only 11–20 percent of OIF/OEF veterans have been diagnosed with PTSD, although 37 percent believe they have suffered from it, whether diagnosed or not (Taylor 1). According to a report by the RAND Corporation, 20 percent of OIF/OEF veterans have PTSD, while 19 percent have TBI (Tanielian).

7. Not all student-veterans draw from the GI Bill or other military educational benefit programs; as a result, some may not be “counted” in an institution’s demographic data.

8. Dependents may use the benefits while the service member is on active duty or after he or she has separated or retired from the service. Spouses must use transferred benefits within fifteen years from the service member’s separation date; children must use transferred benefits prior to reaching the age of twenty-six (“Transfer”).

9. “More than eight-in-ten post-9/11 veterans (84%) say they were deployed at least once while serving—and nearly four-in-ten (38%) say they have been deployed three times or more. Among veterans who were married while they were on active duty, nearly half say deployment had a negative impact on their relationship with their spouse (48%) and nearly as many parents reported that their relationship with their children suffered when they were away (44%)”

(Taylor 15–16). Additionally, “[a]lthough historically, the suicide death rates in the U.S. Army have been below the civilian rate, the suicide rate in the U.S. Army began climbing in the early 2000s, and by 2008, it exceeded the demographically-matched civilian rate (20.2 suicide deaths per 100,000 vs. 19.2)” (“Suicide”).

10. The evidence that the legacy of war is passed from veterans to children is overwhelming, and while here we use *cost* in the broadest possible way, the monetary costs for war are no less real. For examples of studies on the emotional costs, see Motta et al.; Dahl, McCubbin, and Ross; Scharf; Dekel and Goldblatt. For an accessible and personal account of the generational effects of war, see Levinson. Levinson has coordinated writing groups for veterans and their families in the Austin area, and she has taught war literature and writing at several colleges.

11. The Department of Veterans Affairs defines a *school certifying official (SCO)* as “the individual assigned the authority of completing all paperwork necessary to certify the enrollment and changes in enrollment for students eligible for VA educational benefits at their college or university” (Hobbes).

12. See, for example, the “*Top Military-Friendly Colleges and Universities*” guide published by *Military Advanced Education (MAE)*, which promises to encapsulate “in 75 words or less why [each school is] appealing to the prospective military student” and is funded by advertisements purchased by the colleges featured in the publication. See also Brooks, Morse, and Tolis on *US News & World Report’s* methodology for ranking the “best colleges for veterans.”

13. “About 16 percent of veterans use the GI Bill to attend private institutions, roughly the same proportion as students generally” (Sander). See also Fairbanks; Sloane, “Annual”; Sloan, “Veterans.”

14. “To qualify for the full benefit a veteran must have served at least 3 years of active duty after September 10, 2001” (“Post-9/11”). A veteran with 100 percent benefits eligibility can receive up to thirty-six months of education benefits, a monthly housing allowance, and an annual books and supplies stipend.

15. In the state of California in 2009, fewer than 800 veterans were enrolled in the University of California system’s four-year colleges, while 15,000 veterans were enrolled in California community colleges. This may partially be due to the thirty-six-month limit on benefits in addition to the reasons Field outlines.

16. As Michelle Navarre Cleary’s research on adult students demonstrates, “Anxiety about how school works is intensified in writing classes for those adult students who discover that what they remember about academic writing has lost currency. . . . Writing process methods, kinds of assignments, citations methods and the nature of sources have all changed since many adults were in

school. As a result, writing classes can be sites of extreme, potentially paralyzing anxiety for them” (116).

17. For-profit institutions and online institutions provide significant benefits to veterans, such as twelve-month programs, no breaks in benefits, and flexibility in scheduling. Indeed, many service-members take courses while deployed, even in combat zones. Nonetheless, our research was limited to two-year and four-year traditional institutions.

18. Former marine Micah Wright proposes the term *remobilization* rather than *transition* as a key term: “The term *transition* reflects the civilian culture’s idea that the service member needs to change to reflect the civilian ideals; however, the term *remobilization* rhetorically motivates the service member to move from one mission to the other. This term includes the military identity in the civilian discourse” (22–23).

19. As retired army Captain Shannon Meehan argues, “The stories we tell consistently portray veterans in extremes—either emphasizing vets’ heroism beyond comprehension or their propensity for erratic violence. . . . Because of the unreal, formulaic depictions of vets in our culture, [veterans] remain distanced from society, leaving little chance that anyone will actually see [vets] as real people with both strengths and struggles.”

20. In response to the question, “Do first-year writing classes at your institution typically include assignments of personal narrative essays?,” 71.3 percent of respondents to our survey answered “Yes,” with 5.4 percent answering “Don’t know.”

21. See Hart and Thompson (“War”) for discussion of women as outsiders in the military (42–45).

22. Former marine and current two-year college writing professor Galen Leonhardy, for example, suggests that we should be open to offering veterans opportunities to explore their military experiences (and, indeed, research shows that many student veterans appreciate the opportunity to write about VA benefits—whether educational or medical; about veteran homelessness, etc.). We should not, however, require or expect them to do so.

23. We concur with Sarah Roff with regard to “trigger warnings”: “Since triggers are a contagious phenomenon, there will never be enough trigger warnings to keep up with them. It should not be the job of college educators to foster this process. It would be *much more useful for faculty members and students to be trained how to respond* if they are concerned that a student or peer has suffered trauma” (emphasis added). See also Valentino (“Serving”) on considerations to take into account when deciding whether to assign readings, films, and essays on war.

24. In addition, instructors might need to recognize that most students participating in the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) do not have veteran status and have not been deployed.

25. Similarly, Eileen E. Schell and Ivy Kleinbart encourage veteran writers outside of a classroom context “to think about how their military training is an asset” when it comes to “the act of writing” (137).

26. For example, in her *Generation Vet* chapter “Faculty as First Responders: Willing but Unprepared,” Linda De La Ysla, whose student Charles Whittington published his essay “War Is a Drug” in the college newspaper and who never completed his degree after being told by school officials that he would not be allowed on campus until he had a psychological evaluation, acknowledges her lack of preparation for “what to do or what to say” and points out that “many teachers of writing” also lack clarity about how to provide “supportive and pedagogically sound responses” when confronted with veterans’ narratives of trauma (97). Reflecting on the situation, De La Ysla concludes that “faculty [need] to recognize the existence of student-veterans as a distinct yet heterogeneous group . . . and realize that within that diversity [are] individuals [who are] suffering,” and that writing teachers need “to be aware of whatever resources [exist] on campus as well as off” (110).

27. Indeed, one of the many concerns expressed on our survey was how to productively engage student-veterans with their civilian classmates. According to Eugenia Weiss, faculty members who strive to promote “safety and community in the classroom . . . should do all they can to foster student-to-student connections in a nonthreatening and culturally responsive manner.” She references “Allport’s Intergroup Contact Theory as a starting point” (116).

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