

Student Veterans' Assimilation in Higher Education: The Role of Identity Complexity

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Although large numbers of military veterans are currently entering institutions of higher education, veterans often feel out of place in the college setting, identifying more strongly with their military role than that of student. Drawing from the topics of organizational assimilation and social identity complexity, this study examines the communication processes as student veterans adjust to college life. A sample of current student veterans (N = 85) completed measures of assimilation, organizational commitment, and social identity complexity. General acculturation and peer assimilation were positively related to affective commitment to college, while higher identity complexity was related to commitment to program completion and faculty assimilation. Implications of the present findings and areas for future research are presented.

Keywords: student veterans, organizational assimilation, social identity

Institutions of higher learning in America are currently experiencing the largest influx of student veterans since the end of World War II (Elliott, Gonzalez & Larsen, 2011). Since 2001, 2.5 million U.S. men and women have served in military conflicts overseas, and many will take advantage of the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill, providing educational benefits for those with at least 90 days military service on or after September 11, 2001. The transition from military to college life presents a unique set of challenges for service men and women (Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011). Veterans frequently experience health problems such as hearing and vision loss, and more complex issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, alcoholism, strained family relationships and financial and legal problems (Demers, 2011; Elliott et al., 2011; O'Herrin, 2011). In addition to these challenges, veterans often have less academic self-confidence than civilian peers and frequently feel out of place at colleges and universities where individualistic and hedonistic values are common among students and faculty (Livingston et al., 2011).

Communication researchers have begun to explore some of the key issues for veterans' assimilating to civilian life following their deployment. Many of these studies focus on issues related to veterans' health, such as preventative health care behaviors (Villagran, Ledford, & Canzona, 2015) or communication with family members about mental health issues (Wilson, Gettings, Hall, & Pastor, 2015). Despite growing interest and scholarship on the veteran experience, little empirical research has examined communication factors as members of the armed forces make the transition from the military to college (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014). Furthermore, few studies have examined the impact of student veterans' social identity on their adjustment and their commitment to completing their academic goals.

Given the growing number of military personnel attending colleges and universities, veterans' assimilation in higher education is a vital issue. For veterans and nonveterans alike, adjustment to college is a complex process of social adaptation (Orrego & Rodriguez, 2001; Zorn & Gregory, 2005). Since student veterans often bring with them a well-ingrained set of values and expectations which do not always converge with those of the roles of student and learner, their assimilation to the college system can be problematic and many veterans are vulnerable to failure and attrition (Normandin, 2010; Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2013; Wilson, Devereux & Tranter, 2015).

With the present gap in the literature, the current study calls for heightened attention to how communication processes are enmeshed within the experiences of veterans on college campuses. By considering the role of social

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