

Capstone

Confronting Challenges: Understanding the Role of DOD and VA Programs for Transitioning
Post 9/11 Veterans

Submitted by

Benjamin Studley

School of Interdisciplinary Arts & Sciences

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Advisor: Charlie Collins

Co-Advisor: Bruce Kochis

Abstract

This study highlights post 9/11 military veterans' transition into civilian life, identifying the systematic challenges that post 9/11 veterans face as they navigate transition programs designed to ease their integration into civilian life. Given the increasing number of combat and non-combat military personnel transitioning, the system is becoming taxed with a large surge of military personnel exiting every year, most of whom are post-9/11 veterans. Eleven post 9/11 veterans were interviewed to expand the discussion on their challenges experienced during their transition. The challenges included the lack of information regarding higher education, an absence of instructor knowledge and credibility, forgetting veterans are individuals, understanding VA healthcare to include mental health support, understanding VA benefits and the overall effectiveness of TAP to promote goals, plans, and success. The research suggests the programs put in place by the DOD and VA create additional challenges for transitioning veterans into the civilian world.

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Introduction

Currently there are more than 2,083,000 active and reserve military personnel who risk their lives every day protecting the freedoms of the American people (US Military Strength, 2018). Individuals transitioning out of the military never become a civilian again; instead, prior service members are given the title of “Veteran.” Title 38 U.S. Code 10 (2012) defines a veteran as “. . . a person who served in the active military, naval, or air service, and who was discharged or released therefrom under conditions other than dishonorable” (p. 11). Starting in boot camp, new recruits are faced with their civilian identities being stripped away and replaced with military identities (Demers, 2011). The changing values each veteran faces when they transition between the civilian society and military society ultimately constructs a civil-military cultural gap (Collins, 1998). The removal of individual identities, coupled with the hardships affecting the physical and mental state of transitioning veterans, creates additional challenges coming back into the civilian world.

Transitioning military members struggle to reconnect with family members, find employment, and return to school (Pew Institute, 2013). Additionally, injured military soldiers are twice as likely to struggle as non-injured soldiers when readjusting to civilian life because of combat related traumatic brain injury (TBI) and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Pew Research Center, 2011). Veterans who do obtain service connected disability for PTSD encompass 6.8% of all veterans receiving compensation, making it the third most prevalent service connected disability for compensation (McNally & Frueh, 2013). With the projected veteran population expected to surpass 19 million nationwide in the year 2018 (Veteran Projection Model, 2016), identifying and understanding the needs of transitioning service

members is critical to reducing the numbers of veterans that are at a higher risk of challenges during their transitional experience.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to understand post 9/11 military veterans' transition into civilian life--more specifically, I seek to understand the systematic challenges that post 9/11 veterans face as they navigate transition programs designed to ease their integration into civilian life. These programs include the Department of Defense (DOD) transitional assistance program (TAP) which includes a five-day breakdown between the Department of Labor and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Optional programs for higher education, entrepreneurship, and technical training are available, and more recently have become available online (GAO, 2017).

Background

Department of Defense Transitional Assistance Program

The Department of Defense is legally responsible for transitioning military members back into the civilian world as defined in the Federal Register 32 CFR Part 88: Transition Assistance Program for Military Personnel (2016). TAP recently went through a revision in 2012 renaming the program Transition Goals, Plans and Success (TGPS). TGPS can vary between branch of service and location but transition programs are currently required to contain educational counseling, Department of Labor employment workshops, specifically focusing on resume writing, networking, and job searches. There is also a requirement for higher education but only one hour out of the five-day course is dedicated to higher education (Albert, 2017). Additionally, the Department of Veterans Affairs is required to provide information on benefits veterans are eligible to receive which TGPS allows only three hours (GAO, 2017). The typical

format of these transition programs, offered by the DOD, is a five-day course covering the required information where military personnel attend prior to separating from their service. An individual transition plan (ITP) is made up of six elements 1) Needs, finances, training, and certifications. 2) Employment 3) Higher education 4) Technical training (optional) 5) Entrepreneurship (optional) and 6) Transition timeline (optional). However, given the increasing number of combat and non-combat military personnel transitioning into civilian life, the system is becoming taxed with a large surge of 200,000 – 250,000 military personnel exiting every year, most of whom are post-9/11 veterans. This leaves post 9/11 veterans falling through the cracks of a large bureaucratic process (GAO, 2017).

Post 9/11 Veterans

Challenges post 9/11 veterans' face when they return to civilian life is sometimes hard to identify right away. Veterans don't open up about their experiences or show vulnerability, especially when they have been trained to suppress emotion and push through pain. The military sets goals and gives direction every single day for the team to be able to complete the mission. The harsh reality for veterans is they will never be part of that team again and a loss of purpose fills its place. Finding a purpose is one of the biggest challenges veterans face when they look for familiarity and find none in a once familiar world. Isolation from the world and people who understand your experiences are difficult if a veteran doesn't know where to look. The resources available when transitioning may help, but not fully cover every individual challenge veterans are experiencing. Mental health and physical health are another big challenge for post 9/11 veterans who are not sure if anything is actually wrong with them until it is too late. Veterans try to hide or pretend everything is ok, often never reaching out for help putting them further at risk for suicide, substance abuse, and family problems (Kukla, Rattray & Salyers, 2015).

The scope of this research is limited to post 9/11 veterans due to the significant changes in policies regarding transitions and benefits available to veterans as a result of long-term conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Over three million veterans have served since September 11, 2001 to form the familiar post 9/11 era veteran (Holder, 2018). Post 9/11 veterans have served in Iraq, Afghanistan, and numerous other military operations around the world. The typical post 9/11 veteran's service is characterized by more frequent deployments to active conflict areas, longer training and deployment cycles, and rapidly developing conflicts. While post 9/11 veterans did not face the same animosity experienced by the Vietnam era veterans, they face a stigma of "veterans in crisis" which can leave them feeling more isolated and resistant to receiving help for their trauma. In addition to the challenges posed by the prolonged period of conflict on service members, post 9/11 veterans are unique from previous generations due to the rising demand in the technical job markets and lower availability of blue-collar jobs that do not require advanced degrees or years of experience (Ostovary et al., 2011).

Veterans Health Administration

On March 15, 1989 the Veterans Health Administration took effect as one of the three elements of the Department of Veteran Affairs. At the time, the VA was the largest independent federal agency based on budget and second only to the DOD in employees. One-third of the overall U.S. population was eligible for veterans' benefits elevating the VA to cabinet status. The VA's health care system was originally designed with a focus on in-patient care for diagnosis and treatment, but by 2002 and an influx of post 9/11 veterans returning from war had the VA refocused on new methods of medical treatment due to geographical location and different treatment needs (Perlin et al., 2014). Veterans who served in active military service and separated under any condition other than dishonorable may qualify for VA health care. Enrolled

veterans receive their care directly from the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) in facilities that only serve veterans. These facilities have specialized providers to deal with post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injury, amputation, and other injuries unique to veterans. However, VHA facilities are limited in their locations and can often be a burden for veterans who face long travel times due to lack of facilities in their local areas. Additionally, in fiscal year 2016, nine million veterans were enrolled in VA health care (VBA & VHA, 2016) which can lead to long wait times for appointments, especially in often-used services such as mental health and specialty clinics. To address the long wait times and lack of local care the VHA, in 2014, introduced the Veterans Choice Program (Expanded Access to Non-VA Care through the Veterans Choice Program, 2014). In 2016, the VA reported 92.5% of veterans nationally were seen within 30 days or less for their appointments, but this still left 300,000 veterans waiting 30 days or longer (Freier-Heckler, 2017).

Veterans Benefits Administration

Post-service benefits for American military members date back to before the Revolutionary War (Fox, 2003). Veteran's benefits changed the American way of life after World War II with the passing of the GI Bill allowing veterans to get an education and use the VA home loan guaranty program to compete in the housing market (VA History in Brief, n.d.). The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) was the second element in 1989 to take affect when the Department of Veterans Affairs became a cabinet-level department providing a variety of benefits and assistance to service members, veterans, and their families. The major programs within the VBA provide compensation and pensions, insurance and indemnities, vocational rehabilitation programs, services that grant a veteran their entitled benefits, veterans housing programs, and benefit assistance services to help with readjustment transitional assistance (VA

Benefits for Service Members, 2015). The VBA's educational services help provide training benefits to eligible active duty, National Guard, reservists, veterans, and dependents (VBA Annual Benefits Report, 2016). In addition, the appeals management center processes most appeals returned from the Board of Veterans Appeals.

The fiscal year 2018 omnibus spending agreement included \$90.2 billion dedicated to funding these programs within the VBA. This funding ensures the veterans' entitlement to these programs have the monetary support needed to take care of our veterans. Nationwide there are 4.8 million (VA Disability Compensation and Pension Recipients by county of residence Fiscal Year, 2017) veterans who utilize the VBA for their compensation and pension benefits, while one million veterans used their educational benefits. (VBA & VHA, 2016).

Review of Literature

The programs offered through the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs claim to prepare veterans for civilian life but fall short of effectively providing individual transition needs. Ahern, Worthen, Masters, Lippman, Ozer, & Moos (2015) identified service members who felt alienated transitioning to civilian life and not provided the necessary transitional programs due to the military command's lack of support. The majority of veterans they interviewed defined lack of support as resources not being available from the DOD and VA when they needed them during their transition. This research also discovered an unsupportive environment exacerbated the feelings of alienation once veterans separated from the military and were unable to cope with their new environment.

The United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported 87 programs administered by the DOD and the VA to help post 9/11 veteran's transition into the civilian culture (GAO, 2014). These programs provide help with a myriad of issues commonly

experienced by recently separated military personnel to include finding employment, pursuing higher education, disability case management, mental health and substance abuse. The abundance of programs identified by GAO numerically may seem like transitioning veterans have everything they need to succeed upon exiting the military. My research identifies the limited accessibility and knowledge of the programs available making these programs largely ineffective and lacking credibility.

Another study by GAO in 2017 determined 53% of military personnel were transitioning with less than 90 days before their separation date. This contradicts the Vow to Hire Heroes Act of 2011, which requires transitioning military members 12 months before separating to start the transition process (GAO, 2017). The report also found the DOD fails to accurately track the progression of service members through the transitional programs and the 2-day optional higher education course. This led to possible inflation in the percentage of service members reported to have completed TAP classes.

Ahern et al. (2015) found another source of alienation occurs when military members are told their training in the military does not transfer into civilian life. This makes it harder to get a job without going to a civilian school and paying to obtain the same certification already earned in the military. For instance, an emergency medical technician (EMT) in the military can treat patients in their everyday job, but once transitioned into the civilian equivalent EMT job they are restricted in their duties with non-transferable certificates. The focus of this research does a good job at identifying struggles veterans face during their transition. The emerging themes discussed about lack of command support, absence of mental health screening and feelings of alienation were all similar in my study. In addition, my research adds to the conversation of veteran's struggles, while also finding the challenges the DOD and VA create for post 9/11 veterans.

Price (2017) describes his theory with four tactics that are necessary to assist in the transition to civilian life – self-care, connecting with other veterans, finding a routine, and wearing service with pride. Showing openness and vulnerability are looked at in a negative way while serving in the military and asking for help is the hardest thing a veteran faces when returning home. Price touches on the emotional journey back to civilian life and how readjustment takes time to come back home. The basics like plenty of rest, good nutrition, emotional and mental well-being soften the blow of transition. Connecting with other vets can increase the likelihood someone else has a shared understanding of similar experiences. Furthermore, staying in contact with a group of vets who were all stationed together can build community outside the military for the shared experiences and mutual support. This included finding a routine that stimulates the same military environment. Working out was Price's example making sure to mirror the military routine helps veterans feel comfortable with their new normal. Ultimately, veterans wear their service with pride if they feel connected to their new environment and feel respected enough in the civilian world to show it. Not disguising individual accomplishments is thought to help make employers less intimidated about stigmas veterans face returning to the workforce. Although research shows that veterans transition to civilian life when they have self-care, social connections, develop a routine, and wear their service with pride, there is a dearth of research on the ways that social systems – particularly the DOD and VA – create additional challenges for veterans to successfully transition into civilian life.

Ghosh and Fouad (2016) discussed student veterans transitioning into a university setting from the military. They found student veterans' confidence suffered if not aware of higher education and translatable skills. Zogos (2017) discussed TAP's brevity contributing to the limited effectiveness of the program. The knowledge given is too much for a weeklong class

normally given to veterans right before they transition where thoughts of getting a job are not an immediate concern. Veterans also had unrealistic expectations about becoming managers because of their military experience. The real world appreciates veterans, but starting at the bottom again is normally where the job market is going to place veterans who do not have advanced degrees or training.

Stern (2017) argues veterans going into the civilian workforce with service-connected disabilities have barriers to employment because of their mental health issues. The soft skills needed to perform well at an interview and communicate transferable skills coupled with mental health do not foster successful collaboration in the workforce. Ahern et al, (2015) also identified mental health problems or other ailments that were not addressed at the time of transition to be a critical connection to losing trust in a system where their cases are inadequately handled by the VA healthcare system. Kukla et al., (2015) added self-concept and low sense of agency could play a huge role in a veteran's mental health when transitioning from the military. They discovered separating prematurely left veterans with self-doubt and a feeling of ill preparedness to move into the civilian world. Mental health issues created barriers for employment and impeded families moving on with their lives. The veterans who were able to integrate a military sense of self into their civilian sense of self, transitioned smoother with a strong desire to work with other veterans, creating a source of familiar structure for them.

Current Study

This current study focuses on post 9/11 veterans transitioning from their military life into their civilian life. The 11 interviews contained qualitative data described by veterans about their own transitional experiences. Each story is described a little differently, but overarching themes

emerged to give this discussion direction, specifically drawing out the challenges DOD and VA created for veterans during their transition.

Research Question: Does the Department of Defense and Department of Veterans Affairs create challenges for post 9/11 transitioning veterans?

Methods

Participants

To understand the transition of post 9/11 veterans into civilian life, I interviewed 11 veterans who served after September 11, 2001. The demographic data collected specified two veterans were between 18-24 years old (18%), two veterans were between 25-30 years old (18%), four veterans were between 31-40 years old (36%), and three veterans were between 41-50 years old (27%). Race was identified as nine white veterans (82%), one African-American veteran (9%), and one Asian-American veteran (9%). There were eight male veterans (73%) and three female veterans (27%) who self-identified as having transitioned from the military after September 11, 2001. Sexual orientation was self-reported as nine straight veterans (82%), and two gay veterans (18%).

The branches of service identified by each veteran included, six Navy veterans (55%), three Army veterans (27%), and two Marine veterans (18%). Separation from service included five veterans who separated between 2001-2010 (45%), and six veterans who separated between 2011-2018 (55%). Years of service included seven veterans who served 1-5 years (64%), two veterans who served 6-10 years (18%), one veteran who served 11-20 years (9%), and one veteran who served 21+ years (9%). A detailed breakdown of each veteran's demographic information and military service can be found in Table 1.

Procedures

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 post 9/11 veterans from June 2018-July 2018 that lasted from 30-60 minutes. I used a descriptive qualitative research design for my interview protocol, capturing each veteran's personal story of transition from his or her point of view focusing on their challenges the DOD and VA created during their transition. I asked the same probing questions found in Table 2, but also used appropriate follow-up questions (some examples listed in Table 2) to produce a more robust conversation surrounding their personal transition. Purposive sampling was used to recruit interviewees from email distribution lists and network chains throughout social media. This study recruited veterans from local student veteran associations and local leaders in the veteran communities. I distributed my recruiting email to any veterans who transitioned after 9/11 for the opportunity to tell their story of personal transition into the civilian world. Word of mouth led to a few veterans participating and overall provided a diverse group of interviews. Veterans who volunteered to be interviewed verbally agreed to a consent form explaining the purpose of this study before the interviews started. The screening criterion included veterans who transitioned from the military after September 11, 2001.

Each interview was conducted either in person or over the phone and no monetary incentive or personal gain was promised to participate in this study. Interviews were recorded and safely stored on a protected phone, until the research phase was complete, and then permanently deleted. No identifying markers were used to directly identify the veterans interviewed in this study.

The first part of each interview I wanted to find out how the DOD prepared these veterans for civilian life. Follow up questions were then asked to help explain in detail what their

personal transition story encompassed. The second part of the questions focused on veterans benefits and veterans struggle during transition. These questions helped frame the way the DOD and VA create challenges for veterans during their transition and were left open ended to minimize bias.

Table 2. Interview Questions

1.	How did the Department of Defense transitional program prepare you for civilian life?
Follow Up: Do you feel like this program covered all areas you needed to succeed outside the military?	
2.	What could have been done better to support you during your transition while still active duty?
Follow Up: Overall do you feel the transitional program was effective?	
3.	Did you sign up for any of your veteran benefits through the VA after your transition? What were they?
4.	What struggles (if any) did you experience after your transition from the military?
Follow Up: Looking back on your transition, what do you wish you would have known then that you know now?	

Results

Coding Strategy

Using a content analysis theory I established my coding framework. This allowed me to remove a lot of subjectivity from the veteran's interviews and deduce the challenges obtained from each interview. The transcripts of my interview recordings ensured an efficient content analysis to count the challenges that emerged from the qualitative data. After coding the themes it helped identify reoccurring challenges the DOD and VA create for transitioning veterans.

General Findings

The DOD's transitional program and the VA create challenges to military personnel transitioning into the civilian world. In general, post 9/11 veterans described challenges about some portion of their TAP experience and the information provided. The interviews collected

from each veteran included individual challenges faced during their transition. One notable predominant finding included claims of one's own perseverance as the key to his or her successful transition, not TAP. The most common ways veterans described their transitional experience were "a check in the box," "difficult to relate to instructor," and "waste of time." Two veterans interviewed (Male, Navy) (Male, Army) indicated their commands did not send them through the mandatory transitional course and let them separate from the military with no tools to integrate back into the civilian world. Below, I outline the challenges post 9/11 veterans cited during their transition. These challenges included:

- Lack of information regarding higher education
- An absence of instructor knowledge and credibility
- Forgetting veterans are individuals
- Understanding VA healthcare to include mental health support
- Understanding VA benefits and the overall effectiveness of TAP to create goals, plans and success

Higher Education

The DOD's policy on higher education created challenges for veterans to pursue an education outside the military. A majority of veterans (8 of 11) felt the military transitional program was a basic overview and not enough to successfully navigate to a higher educational institution. The current TAP curriculum does not focus heavily on higher education and only provides an optional two-day course for those who choose to go back to school or more recently an online option. In addition the post 9/11 GI Bill is not enough of an offset to keep veterans financially stable. Normally, to get into a new residence requires a substantial amount of money. The way the current policy stands, veterans have to go to school for the first month of schooling

in order to receive their educational benefits. One veteran (Male, Navy) thought, “The opportunity for seeking a higher education in this course [TAP] failed, they did not go in-depth about paths for successful transition into higher education for veterans.” A surface level broad stroke approach for a complex system, such as higher education, requires more guidance and time to understand the programs taught. One veteran (Male, Army) stated, “This felt like it [TAP] severely limits the options I had when transitioning from the military.”

Instructor Knowledge and Credibility

More than half of the veterans who attended TAP (7 of 11) noticed the lack of knowledge by instructors teaching the transitional program. They felt lack of credibility in the instructors hindered the opportunity for trust and obtaining anything meaningful out of the course. One veteran (Male, Marine) said this about his instructor, “I don’t think she was the subject matter expert on anything she was teaching.” Veterans in a few interviews felt TAP was a “collateral duty” for the instructors. In the military a collateral duty is any additional responsibilities overseeing programs but not their full time job. The materials and curriculum to some veterans appeared to be outdated and not currently relevant for real world application. As one veteran (Female, Navy) stated “The course was ruined by the false information presented to our class.” The small number of veterans (2 of 11) who expressed confidence in their instructor’s knowledge also talked about their instructor’s credibility due to their experience in and out of the military.

Veterans as Individuals

Post 9/11 veterans reported class sizes ranging from 30 veterans to over 100 veterans transitioning at one time. A large number of veterans (9 of 11) thought the lack of one-on-one time created challenges in their individual transition. “Not all students fit the same mold”, one

veteran (Female, Navy) specified. A combat veteran (Male, Marine) who transitioned with 100 other Marines felt, “It was the height of the war and no one cared how we got back into the civilian world.” An officer veteran (Male, Army) thought it was a “Cover your own ass, type of course with no real world value.” The military took an individual’s mindset but never gave it back during their transition into the civilian world where individualism is a strong part of survival. One veteran (Male, Army) indicated, “If there would have been someone on the other side to help, it would go a long way in building my trust. The government is great at making soldiers, but horrible at giving them back once they are done with them.”

The missing connection with other veterans created challenges for veterans to reconnect in the civilian world. Veterans consistently (11 of 11) wanted to hear personal stories from veterans who have already transitioned. One veteran (Male, Marine) stated, “I wish someone would have told me it was so hard to make friends outside the military.” Accessibility to networking events and job fairs before getting out would allow for a smoother transition into the civilian world. One veteran (Female, Navy) looked back at their transitional experience stressing, “There is a time in your transition where you think everything is fine because you have to think everything is fine.” The amount of pressure during transition can be unbearable, especially when you have “sucked it up” for so long in the military.

Mental Health Support and VA Health Care

Veterans interviewed unanimously (11 of 11) reported there is no mental health screening when you transition from the military. Cascading mental health challenges veterans face can be debilitating to their new way of life. One combat veteran (Male, Marine) illustrated how he shut down his emotions in order to deal with the aftermath of war and now he cannot turn them back on. The coping mechanisms for this combat veteran include self-medicating and isolating

himself from family and friends. Another combat veteran (Male, Marine) recalled feeling so frustrated saying, “I couldn’t say what was really wrong with me because that’s not what Marines do.”

The five-day TAP class informs veterans of VA health care, but they create challenges by not having continued support once you officially transition. Reflecting on their transition, one veteran specified, “The Veterans Administration does not educate transitioning veterans towards the programs available to them. Veterans have to navigate the huge bureaucracy by themselves.” Veterans don’t always transition when their contract is fulfilled or they retire from the military. A large number in this study left the military by means of a medical discharge (5 of 11). This means they were not fit to continue with the injuries they incurred while serving and had to transition out of the military. Transitional assistance programs do not include portions of their program to help medically discharged veterans. The unique challenges medically discharged veterans face does not promote stability or growth within the transitional assistance program.

VA Benefits

The majority of Post 9/11 veterans (8 of 11) reported educational benefits policy creates challenges for them financially when transitioning into a higher education institution.

There are many struggles veterans face once they finally become a civilian and identify as a veteran. The emerging theme from individual struggles detailed no clear guidance helping understand how anything works in the VA system. As one veteran put it, “We don’t have an advocate when we get out; we are left all on our own to find our resources.” The Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment (VR&E) is a benefit designed specifically for disabled veterans to receive educational benefits for higher education. A veteran (Female, Navy) stated, “I was told to not apply for this program [VR&E] just go get a job.”

Overall Effectiveness of TAP

The overall effectiveness of TAP for veterans (10 of 11) in this study was not effective. One of two veterans (Male, Army) who had a positive experience with TAP still didn't think the program was effective. A rushed process that leaves veterans on their own to figure it out has shown in this research to create challenges for veterans during their transition.

Discussion

Summary of results

My results show the DOD and VA created challenges for veterans by not providing enough information on higher education. There are limited paths for veterans when they exit the military. The instructor's perceived knowledge left veterans questioning the credibility of the information being presented. Sometimes even finding wrong or outdated information being presented as factual. Veterans felt there was no meaningful one-on-one time to better set them up for a successful transition. The size of the transitioning classes ranging from 30-100 veterans and did not promote individual success. The VA's part in explaining health care and benefits lacked a personal connection leaving veterans wanting to network with already transitioned veterans. The overall effectiveness of how TAP is administered is ineffective to most of the veterans in this study. Below, I expand the discussion on the challenges post 9/11 veterans cited during their transition and use other research to highlight differences and similarities.

Educational benefits through the VA provide support to veterans in the form of paying tuition, providing some discretionary funds for books and supplies, and providing a monthly stipend based on the cost of living in the area where the veteran is attending school. The transition from military to college requires confidence and support from an array of individual or groups to support veterans (Ghosh & Fouad, 2015). Veterans can claim 36 months of educational

benefits using the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill available to service members who served three years in active duty and were honorably discharged (Dortch, 2014). There are additional educational benefits available to veterans with a service-connected disability rating of at 20% through the VA Chapter 31 Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program (VR&E) (Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment, 2017). Ahern et al., (2015) found veteran navigators at colleges provided the peer mentorship lacking in most veterans transition. The veterans in my study mentioned these same kinds of veteran coordinators as helpful to bridge the gap for higher education and also other aspects of transition.

The current system pays veterans after their first full month of schooling (Steele et al., 2010), which means veterans have to be financially stable to attend a university. In addition, the GI Bill was changed in 2011 to only count the days veterans attended class, pro-rating the housing allowance (Dortch, 2014) given to cover not only housing, but also all other expenses a veteran is responsible for paying. My study found economic challenges make it difficult to transition into an academic setting without the financial stability required to succeed. The stress of moving from active duty back to the civilian world created adversities to finding affordable housing, which normally requires first, last, and security deposit. Other financial stressors mentioned getting children supplies for school, and spouse and/or veteran finding a job if educational benefits were not adequate to support their family. In addition, books, laptops, lab fees, parking, and other resources needed for schooling come directly from a veteran's pocket until they are paid back from the VA's educational benefit programs. Unless veterans already have a job or source of income it becomes harder for veterans trying to transition into a world where there is no free lunch. Additionally, the veterans I interviewed that pursued higher

education self-identified additional challenges as difficulty adjusting to an academic environment after being out of school for several years.

Once transitioned to the civilian world the DOD is no longer responsible for anything a veteran might further need. Additionally, veterans turn in their military ID cards upon separation and lose their ability to access those military installations and the DOD resources, unless veterans retire from the military. The responsibility of veterans care now falls to the VA, which supporting veterans from all branches of service makes it harder for service members to receive any individual attention or support. Price's (2017) self-care, connecting with other veterans, finding a routine, and wearing service with pride has some merit in the discussion for ways veterans can have a successful transition. My research showed more attention is needed to mitigate the same feelings of alienation Ahern et al. (2015) mentioned in their study.

Failing to sign up for disability benefits, immediately after transitioning from service, can cause increased challenges for veteran's stability. Having to prove disabilities occurred because of military service only become harder as time increases between separations from service. The disability compensation process requires veterans to self-identify any issues they think were caused by their service in the military. Zogas (2017) thinks it's impossible to draw boundaries between mental, physical, and social concerns as veteran's transition and things manifest in their lives. Some veterans in my study mentioned the complexity of transition and the shift of mindset not sinking in until being faced with the problem in real time. Additionally, veterans are often unaware of the potential hazards they encountered. One historical and well-documented example of this is the health problems resulting from exposure to Agent Orange, a deforestation chemical used in the Vietnam War (Institute of Medicine, 1994). Vietnam veterans still have to prove their exposure from Agent Orange caused their illnesses with challenges at every step of the process,

which sadly leaves hundreds of thousands waiting for an appeal. Post 9/11 Veterans face similar unknown medical problems due to exposure to burning oil fields during the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, which may not present as health problems for several years (Institute of Medicine 2011).

A problem for transitioning veterans seen in other studies such as Kukla et al. (2015), noted veterans with mental health issues, who carry the burden of transitioning while also mentally adjusting, may need more assistance upon leaving the military. Isolation was a common theme among the other veterans interviewed in this study. The reintegration of many veterans is a lonely process no matter how many people there are around. My study found similar results and added a failure to making friends and readjusting to their new environment as a major challenge veterans faced.

Limitations

This research highlights challenges 9/11 veterans face during the transition into civilian life. However, given the small sample size of the study, I cannot generalize to all veterans. As such, future research may benefit from conducting a study examining these issues among a larger veteran sample. This study cannot independently verify each self-reported interview conducted and should be taken at face value. Bias towards the DOD and VA were not part of my recruiting criteria when seeking out veterans for interviews. Continued research should include a question about predetermined bias towards the DOD or VA. There was no representation from the Air Force, Coast Guard or National Guard for this study. In future studies, any military branch that transitions veterans should be included.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study sought to identify the challenges the DOD and VA created for post 9/11 veterans. The 11 veterans I interviewed told their transitional stories to help add to the conversation of how the DOD and VA creates challenges during veteran transition. The emphasis on only finding a job when leaving the military and little focus on higher education is creating challenges our veterans experience once they try to go back to school and realize they are not prepared. The transition policy needs to make education just as important as finding a career for their path. The one-on-one connection veteran's need cannot be built around a system that transitions veterans 30-100 at a time. The personal connection built in the military has to continue after the military in order for stability to occur. Having more mandatory workshops to include networking events, and career fairs would help bridge the gap during transition. The credibility of the instructors teaching TAP was hard to earn when they never transitioned from the military, or never worked outside the DOD or VA. Finally, the VA briefings on healthcare and benefits were a surface level attempt to inform veterans about what to expect outside the military. The ineffectiveness TAP brings to transitioning veterans leaves a lot of work to do for the veterans who serve this country.

Policy Recommendations

Although improvements have been made to access the two-day higher educational course online, the DOD did not agree they should track how many people go through the course as suggested by GAO's report in 2017. My recommendation is to include the two-day course into the TAP curriculum to fully commit to a veterans choice to go back to school or into the civilian workforce. However, until a revision of TAP can be made, veterans should

have to go through the online materials that are available and opt-out of the optional courses.

To address the challenges of mental health a board certified psychiatrist outside of the military must conduct screenings during transition. The current program policy does not require any mental health screenings during transition to promote stability. This could be in conjunction with an auto-enrollment for VA health care. The military already has information of each transitioning veteran they could share with the recent data sharing upgrades being implemented by the VA.

A proposal to make transitioning into the civilian world less alienating would bring the resources to the transitioning veterans. A mentorship program or a veteran's transition project could match up transitioning veterans with already veteran leaders in the community. Veterans know how to talk to other veterans and have invaluable lessons learned to share. This would hopefully reduce the feeling of going into a new environment alone and afraid.

The study by GAO in 2017 reported 53% of military personnel transitioned with less than 90 days before their end of active service date. A temporary transitional unit may provide a solution to the DOD's policy of scheduling TAP a year out. Since half of the veterans transitioning are already behind the mandated timeline, let veterans go into a temporary transitional unit 90 days before they transfer. This recommendation could eliminate the brevity issues discussed in my research and add a decompression timeline to expand on programs through the VA for better mental health awareness.

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