"An Ethical Obligation": Promising Practices for Student Veterans in College Writing Classrooms

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Results of a 2011 CCCC Research Grant

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BACKGROUND

This white paper reports on the findings from a 2011 CCCC Research Grant that funded a two-year study of military veterans in college writing classrooms. The findings are drawn from a national survey of writing instructors and a series of site visits and interviews with writing faculty, staff, administrators, students, and Veterans Resource Center (VRC) staff at more than fifty colleges and universities.

Veteran enrollments at colleges and universities continue to climb. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), reports that "between August 1, 2009 and January 23, 2013, approximately 1,143,105 veterans attended institutions of higher education in the United States, and the number of veterans, spouses, and dependents using Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits grew 84 percent from the first to the second year of the benefit" (APSCU 3). Because of the nature of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, those enrollments promise to continue to increase or, at the very least, remain close to current levels for the coming decade as more veterans return from deployments and more veterans' family members use the transferable GI Bill benefits. In addition, since at least one semester of first-year writing is almost universally required at U.S. colleges and universities, the first-year writing classroom (which typically requires close peer-to-peer interaction and conferencing with faculty) is likely to be a place where veteran status is disclosed. Marilyn Valentino made this point clear in her 2010 CCCC's Chair's address, reminding those present that teachers of writing are often the first point of contact for veteran students and calling upon writing instructors to consider how they might "help ease the transition from combat to the classroom." In response to Valentino's call to action, our study aimed to understand the ethical obligations that faculty and administrators face whether veteran students and military family members disclose their status or not, and what obligations writing programs may have to help better serve their veteran populations.

KEY FINDINGS

- Two-year and online colleges and universities appear to be providing most of the first-year writing courses for veterans. This fact is likely a result of several factors, including the desire of student veterans to more inexpensively and quickly fulfill general education requirements at two-year institutions, the ease with which general education requirements transfer to four-year degree-granting institutions (particularly within large state systems), the ability to take certain courses while still in the military, and the flexibility of scheduling that two-year and online colleges provide to veterans, who often return to school while also having families or work obligations that limit their capacity to enroll full-time in classes at traditional four-year institutions. The nature of the current GI Bill, which limits the amount of time students have to complete requirements, also likely contributes to the decision of many veterans to fulfill general education requirements at two-year and online colleges.

- Despite the fact that most veterans seem to be taking first-year writing courses at two-year and online colleges, those institutions often have fewer resources to provide training to faculty, to offer support for veterans through disability services, psychological counseling, etc. or to make available informal lounges/gathering spaces for their student veteran populations.

- A limited number of veteran students seem to be enrolled in upper-level writing courses within departments of English or departments of Writing or Rhetoric at four-year institutions. This limited enrollment likely reflects the anecdotally more popular majors pursued by veterans (including social work, law enforcement,

politics, international relations, business, and engineering).

- In general, while many writing faculty have some awareness of the presence of student veterans in their classes or on their campuses, few have received formal training on veteran issues, military culture, or military writing conventions. On many campuses we visited, WPAs and other writing faculty were either unaware of the presence of Veterans Resource Centers on their campuses and/or had not had any contact with the staff of those offices.

- Campus trainings about student veterans tend to be based on a deficit model. Most examples of campus trainings that we saw were focused on the "signature wounds" of the current wars (i.e. Traumatic Brain Injury and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, TBI and PTSD) and the challenges student veterans face in making the transition from service to college. The trainings are typically devoted to the transition from *combat* to college. While such trainings are valuable, they suggest an image of student veterans that is not in keeping with our findings. Most veterans have not directly experienced combat, and while the legacies of war may resonate deeply with all veterans, combat experience is not a universally shared experience among service members. Further, most faculty report high achievement among veterans, as well as a high sense of initiative, professionalism, and leadership. Trainings that focus on the deficits of student veterans likely perpetuate already established stereotypes of the "veteran," often calling on the simplistic narratives of veterans as heroes or as wounded warriors, and they rarely acknowledge the complex histories of medical traumas such as TBI and PTSD. In other words, they fail to engage in the nuances of military service, wars, careers, and disabilities in favor of, interestingly, a briefing model whose effect is to perpetuate one-dimensional narratives about what it means to be a "veteran." Further, the trainings generally fail to make connections between veterans and other student groups. For instance, many of the transition issues that are reported by veterans parallel in significant ways the transition many nontraditional students face when making the move from careers back to college, suggesting the possibility that some of the transitional issues are less about their status as veterans and more about their status as adult learners. While we recognize the need for institutions to address trauma within their student bodies, we are concerned that doing so in isolation may foster an atmosphere contrary to the stated goal of improving campus cultures for veterans.

- The personal essay, in various forms, continues to be a mainstay of first-year writing classrooms. This practice is noteworthy for our study because such essays likely facilitate, whether wittingly or not, disclosure of veteran status. Given that personal essays continue to be used across a wide variety of curricula and institutions, specific training for faculty seems especially important as the wars end and more veterans and military family members populate classrooms. As Valentino pointed out in her Chair's Address, "what if individuals decide to describe traumatic events? In what manner do we respond on paper, or in person? I have always espoused that we are not trained therapists; however, we do have an ethical obligation to react responsibly."

- Most writing faculty who have taught veteran students tend characterize them as mature, serious students who seek frank, direct guidance as they develop as writers, but may be unfamiliar with or even resistant to academic writing conventions such as recursive revision and peer review. They report that the veterans often serve as role models or develop leadership positions in class and that they tend to be "mission-oriented" and timely in their approach to completion of assignments. Many professors also remarked on the value of the varied cultural experiences and broader worldviews that veterans tend to bring to class discussions and writing assignments. Veteran students reportedly often welcome the opportunity to write

about topics related to the military and veterans such as VA benefits, job placement, homelessness, etc.

- Because not all student veterans self-identify to faculty, faculty may be unaware of the veteran students in their classes and therefore may unwittingly be inattentive to those students' needs, as these "invisible" veterans may be reluctant to seek additional help and/or may have some difficulty relating to classmates. This is especially true of military service members' families, many of whom may choose not to disclose their status as children or spouses of veterans.

- Writing centers do not track veteran students who use their services, though several writing center staff members we interviewed indicated they were aware of veterans using their services. At least one program was piloting a veteran-to-veteran writing center model.

- Considerations of gender, race, and sexuality remain on the periphery of discussions about student veterans. While there were some notable exceptions, these topics went largely unmentioned by those we interviewed. We note that our interviews were not targeted toward discerning information about these topics, and we note that if any particular difficulties around these issues were present on a campus that they would likely not have been disclosed to outside interviewers. Nonetheless, our site visits suggest that discussion of these topics were not emphasized in any training or any orientation for student veterans, and they were largely nonexistent in any training for faculty or staff.

METHODOLOGY

Our study used two methods of collecting data. The first, an online, national survey, was distributed to writing faculty and administrators. The second, interviews and site visits, drew on information from the survey and research into college and university veteran populations in order to help us identify key institutions to visit and central figures to interview.

SURVEY

In May 2011, we sent out a web-based survey created in SurveyMonkey containing a total of 30 questions, including multiple-choice and open-ended responses designed to gather a variety of data. In spring 2011, we sought and received IRB approval through our home institution in order to conduct the survey. We sent the survey link via professional list-servs (WPA, tech-rhet, attw-l, NCTE two-year college interest group) and direct email to WPAs, writing center directors, writing teachers, and writing center tutors. We received 439 completed responses from self-selected participants from more than 205 distinct institutions. We collected survey data until August. In August 2011, we spent two weeks participating in the Dartmouth Summer Seminar for Composition Research, during which time we learned to process and code the data we had collected from our survey, how to conduct qualitative interviews, how to refine our research questions going forward, etc. Processing the data we received helped us to 1) formulate questions to ask interview subjects during upcoming site visits, 2) formulate an initial set of hypotheses about veteran assimilation into college writing classrooms, and 3) narrow and target locations for site visits using our funding from the research grant. Our institution partially funded our participation in the Dartmouth program. We did not use CCCC funding to participate in this program.

SURVEY FINDINGS:

The following charts and graphs represent a selection of the most revealing results of the survey with regards to writing instruction and faculty training. They also reflect those results that most influenced the direction of our inquiries during interviews and site visits.

Which of the following services are available to veterans at your institution? (Check all that apply)
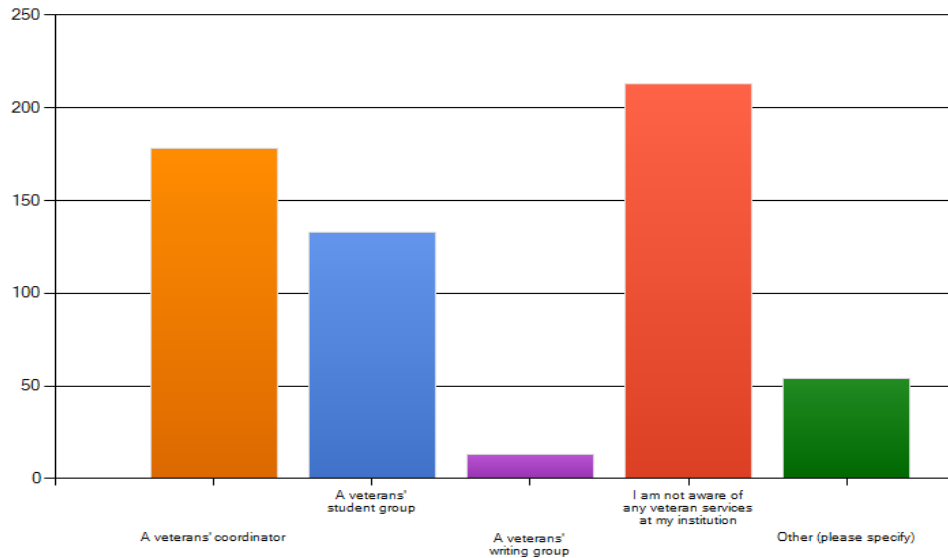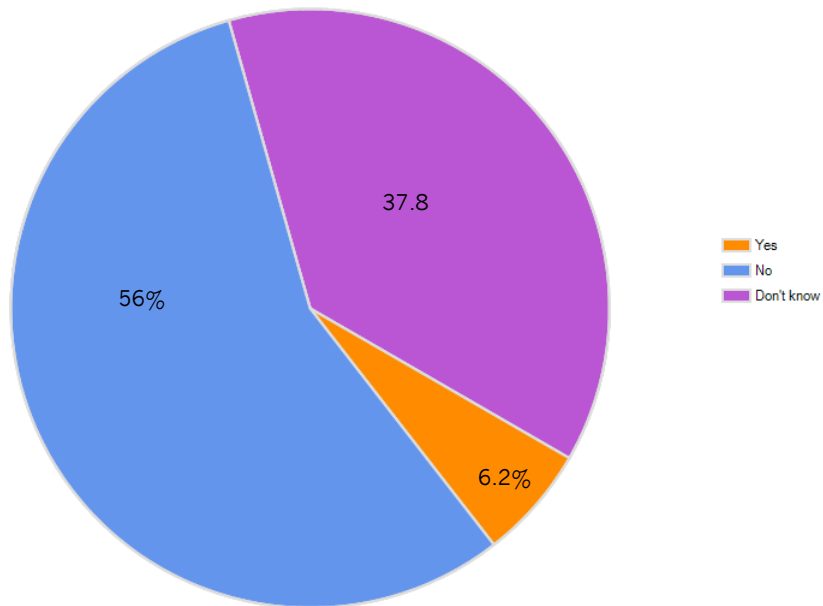

To whom has your institution provided training for understanding veterans' issues? (Check all that apply)
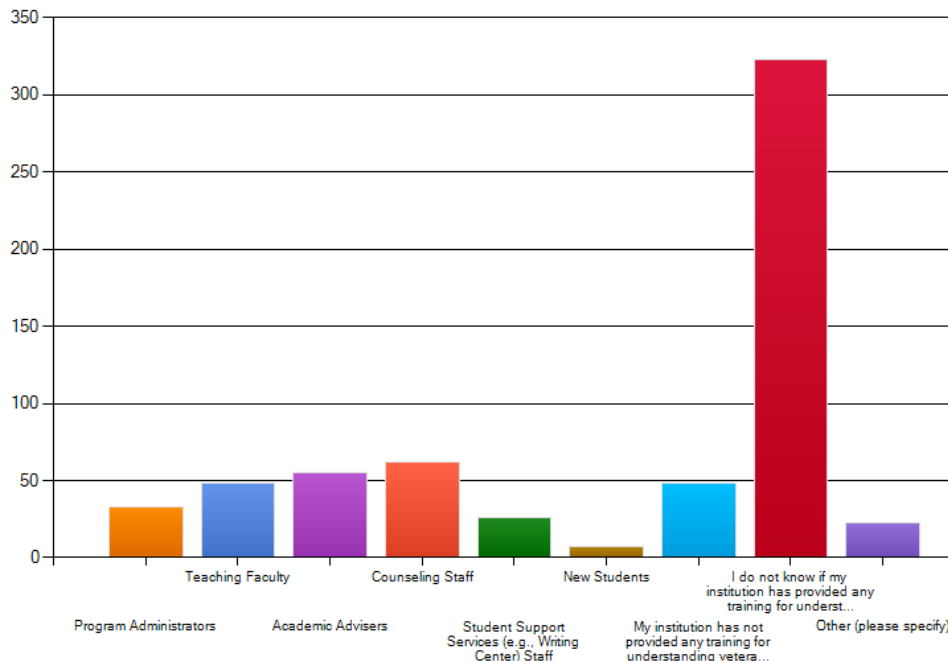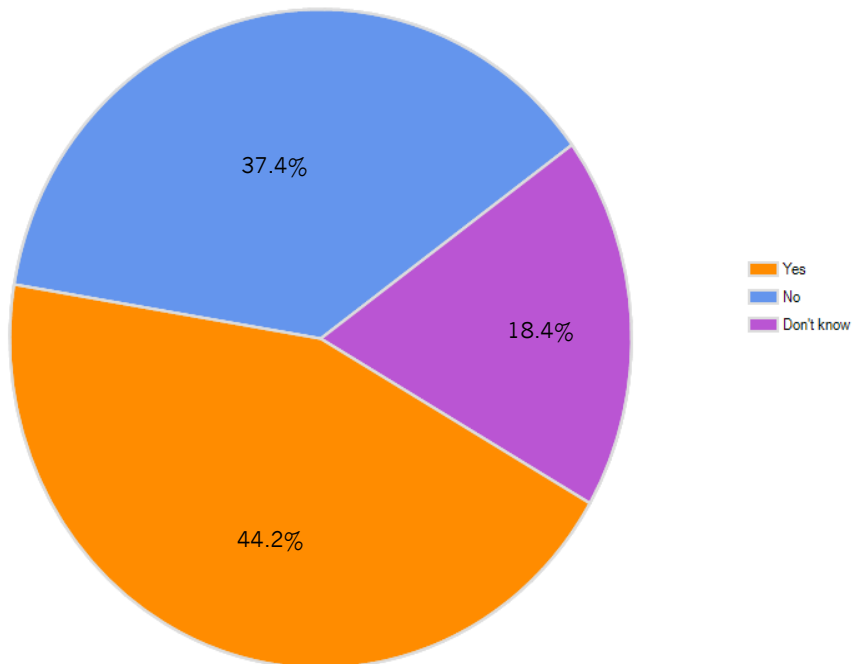
Does your institution provide any course offerings that restrict enrollment to veterans only?

Yes
No
Don't know

37.8

56%

6.2%

Have you noticed an increase of veteran students in your writing classrooms?

Yes
No
Don't know

37.4%

18.4%

44.2%

Have you received any training for understanding veterans' issues in the writing classroom?
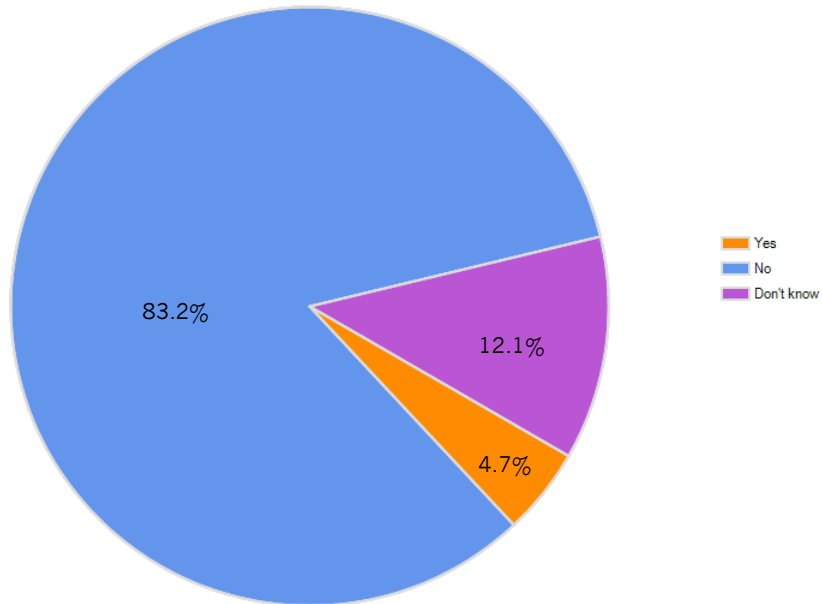
92%

8%

Yes

No
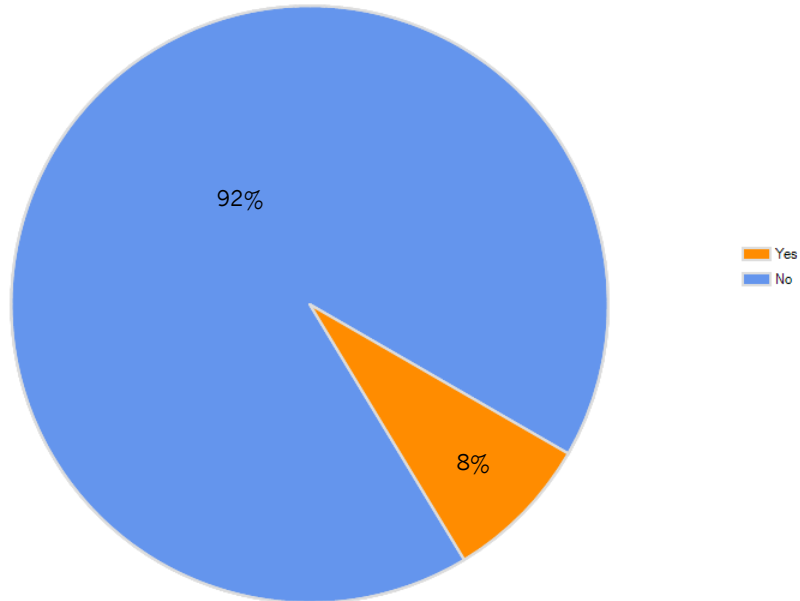
Has your department or program discussed in a formal way, either in department meetings or committee meetings or other formal settings, the effect of veterans in the writing classroom?

69.3%

18.4%

12.3%

Yes

No

Don't know
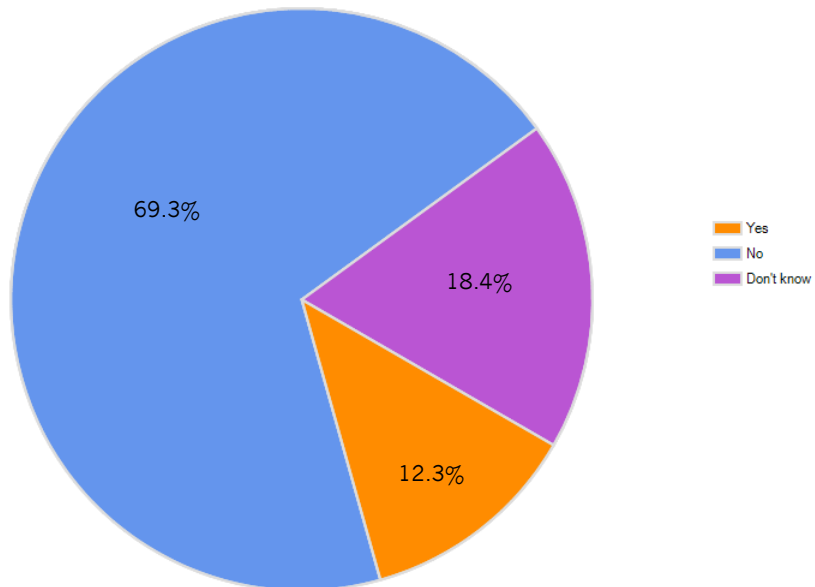
Does your department or academic program provide any writing classes that restrict enrollment to veterans only?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

83.2%

12.1%

4.7%

Do first-year writing classes at your institution typically include assignments of personal narrative essays?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

71.3%

23.3%

5.4%
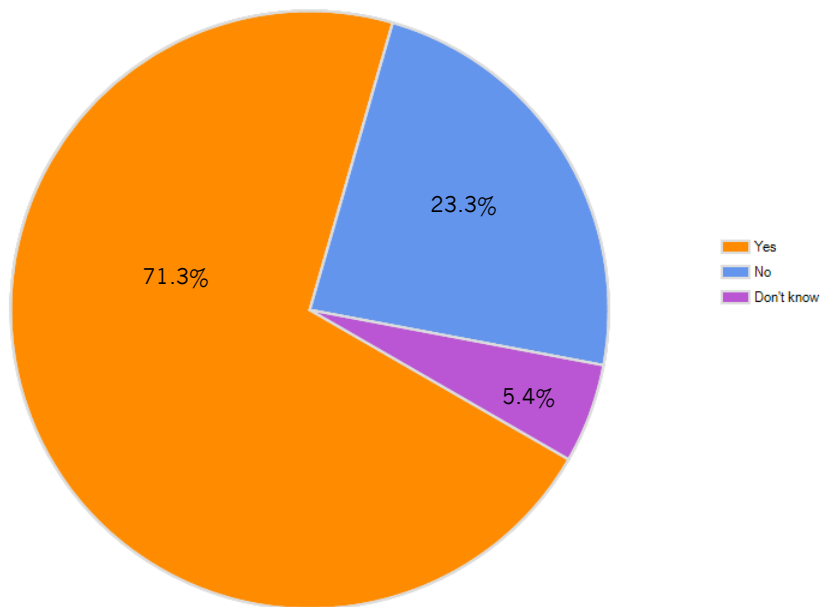
SITE VISITS AND INTERVIEWS

Beginning in fall 2011, we conducted semi-structured interviews in order to collect more data on writing program practices in relation to veterans. We conducted most of these interviews onsite at various colleges and universities, and we conducted others via telephone or Skype. We also conducted a few interviews at off- site locations (for instance, we conducted interviews at some professional conferences).   We focused our onsite visits to institutions within those states with the highest veteran populations (California, Florida, Texas, Virginia), and we used data collected in our survey to help us further refine our search for schools to visit. In all, we visited 46 institutions.

The site visits provided us with opportunities to speak not only with writing faculty and WPAs, but also with higher level administrators, mental health counselors, writing center staff, student veterans, and, perhaps most importantly, staff of Veterans Resource Centers (VRCs). VRCs are rapidly expanding across college campuses, and we visited a number of institutions at which a VRC was brand new or just about to be opened. The staff at the VRCs often had a clear sense of the state of veterans on a campus, and they were often keenly aware of the challenges faced not only by veterans in transitioning to colleges, but by campus administrators as they try to negotiate the complexities of the new GI Bill. VRCs are frequently the location for grassroots veteran awareness campaigns (indeed, many VRCs began through the work of one or two veteran student advocates), and they are often, as a physical space, the gathering spot for many student veterans.

The disconnect of VRCs from academic programs, however, was also very clear. Most VRCs are organized under Student Affairs, and connections to faculty or to classroom practices appear to be limited. While many VRC directors indicated that they had provided training to administrative staff, very few had provided training specifically for faculty, or had limited attendance at faculty training sessions they did offer. Similarly, many faculty members we interviewed were unaware of the availability of their campus VRC as a resource. Therefore, one of our key recommendations is to encourage faculty and WPAs to foster outreach and interaction with VRCs.

VETERANS-DESIGNATED CLASSES

Within several of the writing programs we visited, we found courses being offered that were in some way focused on veterans or veterans' issues. We identified three primary types of these courses:

1. **Veterans-Only**: only veterans or military service members are allowed to enroll in these courses. Many focus at least part of the class on topics directly related to the military or to the veteran experience.

2. **Veteran-Focused**: veterans and the military experience are the focus of these courses, and while enrollment is not restricted, the topical focus of the class intentionally encourages veteran enrollment.

3. **Veteran-Friendly**: faculty in these courses have committed to creating a safe place for veterans, and they take into account the veteran status of their students in every part of the course, from

classroom seating to creation of assignments. While the veteran or military experience is not the focus of the class, faculty who designate their classes as friendly to veterans signal to veterans their awareness of the benefits and challenges of the transition from the military service to higher education.

While investigating these courses was not the focus of our study, we would, based upon our interviews, like to make several observations on these classes. We hope to make further comment on them in a future publication.

- The motivation for offering these courses was consistently articulated as an attempt to help provide veterans more carefully considered curricula that consciously take into account the student veterans' transition to college. As such, they represent a movement to more fully understand how veterans not only transition to higher education, but how higher education is itself in a state of transition as it adjusts to the effects of a decade of war.

- Reported success of these classes was mixed. Even at those institutions where the courses were taught across multiple semesters, even by the same instructor, the reported benefits of the classes were paired with a very clear awareness of potential drawbacks, such as isolating veterans from their civilian counterparts rather than assimilating veteran students into the larger campus culture.

- Veterans-only class enrollments seemed to be difficult to sustain. Enrollments varied wildly across semesters, and classes at some institutions had to be canceled due to low enrollments (see Grasgreen for more on the challenges of sustaining veterans-only classes).

- Among the difficulties instructors face in running these courses are long-standing differences between service members based on branch of service (Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force), rank (especially between enlisted and officers or senior non-commissioned officers and junior enlisted personnel), combat and non-combat veterans, and deployed and non-deployed veterans, as well as male and female veterans, straight and gay veterans, and pre-9/11 and post-9/11 veterans. The wide range of experiences among service members makes categorizing students as "veterans" problematic, especially in approaching a classroom setting where assumptions about the definition of "veteran" may miss fundamental distinctions between veterans within a classroom. Those distinctions can bring with them pronounced hierarchies, expectations, and epistemologies that can deeply affect classroom dynamics.

- Faculty training for running these classes varied significantly across institutions. Most course offerings with these designations seemed to emerge primarily out of a faculty members' interest in the topic and the student demographic. Instructors who were veterans themselves taught some of these courses. In other cases, the faculty member teaching the course had not received any particular formal training to run these classes, and some were being offered by graduate students, whose levels of experience varied considerably.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WRITING FACULTY AND WPAS

These recommendations are intended primarily for faculty in schools with high veteran populations, in schools that are actively recruiting veterans and service members, or schools that are located in areas with high military

and veteran populations. Veterans Resource Centers can usually provide you with information on the numbers of veterans at your school. If your school does not have a VRC, registrar's offices typically have a "certifying official" whose job is to help students obtain their GI Bill benefits. That person will usually have a good idea of how many students (veterans and dependents) on campus are claiming those benefits.

- **Syllabus Statement**: we recommend that instructors include a brief statement on their syllabus that, at the very least, points veterans to the campus VRC or certifying official and communicates the classroom as a safe place. Here is a sample statement from Katt Blackwell-Starnes at Georgia Southern University: "I recognize the complexities of being a student veteran. If you are a student veteran, please inform me if you need special accommodations. Drill schedules, calls to active duty, complications with GI Bill disbursement, and other unforeseen military and veteran-related developments can complicate your academic life. If you make me aware of a complication, I will do everything I can to assist you or put you in contact with university staff who are trained to assist you."

- **Classroom Assignments**: we recommend that instructors consider a veteran audience when crafting assignments. This is not to suggest that assignments have in mind only veterans as an audience, but much like an instructor might be sensitive to differences in race, gender, and religious background in crafting assignments, we recommend similar attention to military service. We particularly recommend that instructors who craft personal essay assignments provide options for student writers. While many student veterans may seek opportunities to discuss their service, others may need to have space to reinvent themselves as students, as civilians, or as members of a new community. We recommend that faculty facilitate opportunities for veteran students to research and write about topics related to their military service or veteran status, even while faculty conduct classes and craft assignments that also allow veterans to maintain their privacy about their histories of that service.

- **Writing Centers**: we recommend that writing center administrators consider hiring veterans as professional tutors. Further, we recommend that writing center administrators contact and collaborate with campus VRCs in order to provide services to veterans at the VRC. While we recognize that for some institutions placing staff in locations away from a centralized writing center can be difficult, the nature of veteran needs, which may include a need to work within a safe zone, may necessitate investigating the use of decentralized staffing. We note that writing centers may find opportunities for funding new positions by partnering with VRCs and VA work-study students.

- **End Deficit Model Training**: our interviews and survey results suggest that most writing instructors see veterans as bringing significant benefits to a class. Nonetheless, most current training about veterans in higher education tends to focus on veteran deficits: TBI, PTSD, transition issues, adjustment issues, absenteeism. While we recognize a real and present need to keep faculty informed about the ways that the "signature wounds" of the current wars may manifest themselves in classrooms and coursework, and while we acknowledge the very real transitional challenges and cultural adjustments veterans face in moving from military service to college, we are concerned that fixation on these issues alone facilitates views of veterans that do more to inhibit learning than to foster it. Instead of training solely on TBI or PTSD, for instance, we recommend roundtable discussions that include veterans, faculty, and staff who can engage in meaningful ways with the complexities of military service while also facilitating real discussion about the benefits of service to creating a healthy classroom dynamic. Further, we recommend that any training remind participants that veterans are, by federal law, a protected class,

and as such, warrant some explicit considerations that many faculty members may only associate with gender, race, or ethnicity.

- **Foster Interaction with Veterans Resource Centers**: At those schools where veterans and military families are being actively recruited, and at those institutions who are in particularly close proximity to high populations of veterans and military service members, we recommend that WPAs make a conscientious effort to contact the directors of these centers (if available) in order to coordinate training and to sponsor events that signal awareness of the military population on a campus, such as film screenings, readings, and celebrations of writing. VRCs can provide significant resources to assist faculty. Some VRCs can provide training for faculty. Some can even provide intensive training modeled after "safe zone" training, which provides faculty members with visible signs (such as stickers for office doors) of completed training so that veterans can recognize faculty who are conversant with their lives as veterans. Most VRCs provide services to help students negotiate their transition from military service to college and therefore represent a powerful resource in helping faculty to encourage veterans' growth as students. VRCs may provide tutoring services or counselors, and they help student veterans negotiate the complexities of the GI Bill. In short, not unlike Women's Centers or LGBT Centers on a campus, VRCs are centers of advocacy and support, and faculty can help all students in their classes by collaborating with the VRCs on their campuses.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDY

- **Online Writing Courses**: while we hoped to investigate online courses, we ultimately limited the scope of our inquiry to traditional classrooms only. The complexity of the online space and the recent revelations of for-profit online schools' predatory recruitment of veterans made inquiry into online education prohibitive. Nonetheless, given the number of veterans using online education, it is likely one of the most important venues to study. Given the expanding scholarship on digital learning and online writing courses, research into this field promises to provide new depth to our understanding of literacies among service members and veterans.

- **"Veterans Industry"**: we believe greater critical inquiry into the veteran industry, a term coined by Eileen Schell, that has arisen to serve veterans would be valuable. Clarifying college and university roles in shaping and maintaining that industry needs to be accompanied by inquiry into institutional hierarchies, priorities, and funding allocations. While we believe that institutional commitment to veteran populations is important and enriching, we recognize as well that stakeholders in the advancement of veterans have complex reasons for their positions. Understanding those reasons is necessary to ensure ethical practice and genuine engagement with the veteran community.

- **Writing Groups**: among the questions we asked in our interviews was whether interviewees were aware of either formal or informal writing groups, on-campus or off-campus, for veterans. The responses suggest that, while such groups are not universally available, they do exist across the country in various forms. Understanding the genesis, form, and function of these groups would be a rich avenue of future study, as they often connect communities with colleges and universities, and they often foster cross-generational dialogues.

- **Gender/Sexuality**: given the relative absence of women in many of the VRCs we visited, the prevalence of ongoing gendered assumptions tied to the term "veteran," the recent revelations of pervasive sexual harassment and assault in the military, the overturning of the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, and the removal of restrictions on women serving in combat operational specialties, we see opportunities for writing professionals to collaborate with colleagues in women's studies, LGBT studies, and masculinity studies to apply these theoretical frameworks as they consider how to address complex issues of gender and sexual identity as they relate to veterans in writing classrooms.

- **Socio-economic Class**: most veterans who are pursuing Associate's degrees and Bachelor's degrees are coming from the enlisted ranks. Studies have offered conflicting accounts of the socio-economic class of the enlisted personnel during war years. For example, Amy Lutz has argued that there is greater disparity among socio-economic class in the military than among race or gender. The (admittedly-biased) Heritage Foundation, however, suggests that the enlisted ranks come largely from the middle class, and that reading levels among the newly enlisted are higher than their peers. A recent study by the Student Veterans Association (SVA) indicates that a greater percentage of military personnel are high school graduates (30%) compared to the civilian population at large (28.5%) and that more military personnel have completed "some college" (35.5%) compared to their civilian counterparts (27.6%). However, because so many veterans are taking their general education writing requirements at schools whose cost is usually significantly lower than four-year institutions, a greater understanding of socio-economic class among student veterans would likely provide insight into not only the difficulties of student transition, but also literacy levels and preparedness for higher education.

- **Degree Completion/Graduation Rates**: in response to several 2012 media reports (Briggs; Woods) that first-year postsecondary dropout rates for veterans were as high as 88%, the SVA conducted its own study, which found that "student veterans' post-secondary completion rates are far better than previously reported in the media" but "there remains a potentially large proportion of student veterans, approximately 30%-40%, not completing their post-secondary programs" (5). Given that success in the first year of post-secondary education has such a strong correlation to persistence in attaining a degree—"twenty-eight percent of first-year students in four-year colleges do not return for their sophomore year. Forty-four percent of those enrolled in two-year colleges do not return for their second year" (Feldman and Zimbler)—WPAs, writing center directors, and writing instructors may want to investigate ways in which they can facilitate the success of student veterans, in particular, in their first year of college.

CONCLUSION

Over the course of our two-year study, we have been powerfully reminded that institutional contexts vary greatly and have a significant effect on the levels of awareness, amount of training, and kinds of support offered for faculty and for veteran students—thus rather than develop "best practices" for writing programs at large, we recommend that each institution consider its local context as it develops strategies for responding ethically to its student veteran population.   We hope this white paper will help writing program administrators and instructors frame questions and develop faculty training as they consider their "ethical obligations" to student veterans, and we welcome the opportunity to serve as a resource for you.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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