Military Veterans Transitioning to Higher Education and the Civilian Workforce: Challenges, Opportunities, Supports, and Resources

49th Annual Conference

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What is AHEA?

The purpose of the Adult and Higher Education Alliance (AHEA) is to help institutions of higher education develop and sustain learning environments and programs suitable for adults.

AHEA does this by:

- Providing a forum for professional educators to share resources and information about alternative degree programs on a national and international level.
- Stimulating practitioner research, thereby contributing to the integration of theory and practice, and promoting the improved quality of our efforts.
- Serving as a vehicle for cooperative consultation and collaboration among professionals in the field.
- Integrating interests and concerns from a variety of areas within adult higher education including distance, international, and liberal education.
- Promoting the rights of adult students.
- Influencing institutional and public policies concerning the principles of quality practice applied to adult education.
- Promoting cultural diversity and multicultural perspectives and maintaining that commitment through the incorporation of such perspectives into the policies, procedures, and practices of alternative degree programs for adults.

Letter from the Editors

Dear Reader,

We are pleased to present the Proceedings of the 49th annual conference of the Adult and Higher Education Alliance (AHEA), held online in February and in person in March 2025. This year's conference theme, "Military Veterans Transitioning to Higher Education and the Civilian Workforce: Challenges, Opportunities, Supports, and Resources," reflects our ongoing commitment to advancing the field. We extend special thanks to the AHEA Board of Directors, members, and contributors. Without their support, this publication would not be possible.

As always, the AHEA Board of Directors provided continuous support for the mission of AHEA through their outreach, service, and perseverance. To the members of the Adult and Higher Education Alliance, we do what we do because of you. You are the backbone of AHEA's growth, networking, and collaboration. Thank you for your membership and participation in our organization and at our conference each year.

To those who contributed papers for these Proceedings, thank you for expanding our collective knowledge. Through your research, theory, and practice, we can strengthen our efforts to educate and serve adult learners in a variety of contexts. We appreciate your service to the larger community of professors, educators, and practitioners. Thank you.

AHEA is always looking for ways to contribute to our shared endeavor of educating adults. Please share your feedback; we look forward to hearing from you. Enjoy your reading of the variety of engaging topics related to Adult and Higher Education.

Thank you,

Patricia (Trish) Holt

Welcome from the AHEA President

On behalf of the Adult Higher Education Alliance, I extend a warm welcome to the proceedings of the 48th AHEA Annual Conference. The conference theme, inspired by the book Military, *Veterans Transitioning to Higher Education and the Civilian Workforce: Challenges, Opportunities, Supports, and Resources*, edited by Yvonne Hunter, Timothy J. Ross, and Mary V. Alfred explores enhancing the education journey of military affiliated adult learners. This conference, which recognizes the unique needs and challenges of adult students, is a platform for educators, administrators, policymakers, and researchers to share insights and discuss practical solutions. As in previous years, this conversation is essential for us, as adult educators, to engage in. It is an honor to serve as the president of the AHEA and to work alongside colleagues on the AHEA Board of Directors. Together, we are part of a community dedicated to enhancing the adult learner's experience in higher education. Thank you for your attendance and, if applicable, for your contributions to these proceedings.

Jane B. Northup, Ph.D. President, AHEA (2023-25)

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Navigating Dual Commitments: A Qualitative Pilot Study of Upper-Division ROTC Cadets' Experiences with Student Support Services at Regional Public Institutions of Higher Education

Jeff Aulgur and Jeremy Schwehm

Abstract

Upper-division Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) cadets at regional four-year public institutions of higher education encounter unique challenges due to military training and advanced coursework demands. Limited research has examined the perceived ineffectiveness of student support services specifically for upper-division ROTC cadets. This pilot qualitative study explores the experiences and perceptions of two cadets at a regional public university in the West South-Central region of the United States. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews that enabled cadets to share their experiences and insights. Interview transcripts were analyzed thematically by pilot-testing qualitative open coding and theme development using ChatGPT prompt engineering.

Keywords*: ROTC, student services, ChatGPT, qualitative analysis*

Over 70% of all United States Army officers, including Active Duty, Army Reserve, and National Guard, received their commission through an Army Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) program hosted at 275 institutions of higher education (US Army Cadet Command, 2022), including more than half of the Army's Generals serving in the Active Component. Additionally, ROTC provides more merit-based college scholarships than any other program in the United States (US Army Cadet Command, 2022). Upper-division ROTC Cadets, Military Science (MS) III or Military Science (MS) IV, receive significant fiscal benefits to offset educational expenses, including Army ROTC room and board, a book allowance, and a $420 standardized monthly contract stipend. Cadets enlisted in the Army Reserve or National Guard, known as the Simultaneous Membership Program (SMP), receive additional benefits, which may include 100 percent tuition reimbursement, an enlistment cash bonus, a monthly allowance for Army Reserve and National Guard duties and responsibilities, and access to the Montgomery GI Bill (US Army, 2025; Army National Guard, 2025). However, on average, upper-division ROTC Cadets commit to approximately 12 to 16 hours of military service per week. These commitments include Military Science courses (3 hours), a leadership lab (2 hours), physical training (3-5 one-hour sessions a week), and up to two field training exercises per term. Cadets enrolled in the Simultaneous Membership Program (SMP) commit to an additional 16 hours a month and two weeks each year to meet their Army Reserve or National Guard service commitment. This means an SMP cadet balances a part-time job equivalent workload alongside their full-time college studies. The time commitment may vary depending on the cadet's specific ROTC program and National Guard/Army Reserve unit requirements.

A limited body of literature explores the intersection of ROTC cadets in higher education and student support services. ROTC cadets perceive low levels of autonomy support from their local cadre (Raabe et al., 2020), a lack of cadre knowledge regarding librarian and academic support services (Rod-Welch et al., 2017), and a minimal understanding in higher education regarding

the commitments required of military students (Mobley et al., 2022; Parsons & Ash, 2022). One indicator of enhanced institutional commitment to this unique student population is establishing a dedicated office for veterans and current military students (Mobley et al., 2022; Parsons & Ash, 2022). Johannes Raabe et al. (2020) introduce the potential application of Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory to ROTC cadets: "Although self-determination theory has... yet to be applied to the context of ROTC, researchers have found benefits associated with fostering self-determined extrinsic and intrinsic motivations in other domains (e.g., academics, music, and sport)" (p. 399). Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) asserts that an individual's motivation and general wellness self-concept rely on three psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These individual psychological needs are critical to explaining the quantity and quality of one's motivation for pursuing the "what" (content) and "why" (process) of goal attainment (e.g., a commissioned officer in the US Army) (Raabe et al., 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Raabe et al. (2020) suggest self-determined cadets believe they can accomplish the demands of ROTC (competence), select actions based on their discernment as opposed to reliance upon the cadre (autonomy), and "feel related when they are accepted and valued as members of the group" (p. 399) as it relates to military service (relatedness)."

Methods

This pilot study utilizes ChatGPT as a qualitative research analysis tool to discern the perceptions and experiences of student support services from the perspective of upper-division ROTC cadets. Research reflexivity must be addressed, as one researcher is a retired Command Sergeant Major from the United States Army Reserve with 26 years of military service, including extensive experience mentoring and serving junior officers (Captains, Lieutenants, and Second Lieutenants). This background, along with 18 years in higher education, provides valuable insight into the experiences of upper-division ROTC cadets, but also introduces potential biases, such as assumptions about the importance of institutional support and the challenges faced by military-affiliated students. The experimental use of ChatGPT as a qualitative analysis tool to develop codes and themes alleviates this bias by removing both researchers from direct thematic analysis. ChatGPT is an artificial intelligence program that employs machine learning algorithms to analyze data and generate responses. The university's institutional review board, the US Army ROTC Cadet Command, and the Army Human Research Protections Office (AHRPO) approved the study's methods and protocols.

The researchers utilized a class presentation and individual emails to invite ten ROTC cadets with junior or senior academic status to participate in the study. Invitees received physical and digital versions of the informed consent and semi-structured interview script, indicating a time commitment of less than one hour. All invitations noted potential researcher bias and military affiliation. Two out of ten invitees participated, reframing the study as an exploratory pilot effort. One cadet formally declined, while six did not respond.

The principal investigator scheduled interviews in collaboration with each participant to determine a date and time that best mitigated the cadets' time constraints. At the start of the interviews, cadets were advised to avoid using proper names. In addition to the formal informed consent, participants were reminded that only interview transcripts would be retained. Personal

identifying information (PII) would be redacted from the transcript, and the video recording would be deleted. The principal investigator deployed a semi-structured interview protocol. The first four questions received identical opening questions:

Can you describe your experience as an upper-division ROTC cadet balancing military training with your academic coursework?

- o *Follow-up:* What specific challenges have you faced in managing these dual responsibilities?

Do you have a National Guard or Army Reserve commitment in addition to your role as an ROTC cadet?

- o *Follow-up:* If so, does your family have a history of military service?

Can you describe examples of student support services available at your university?

- o *Follow-up:* How did you learn about these services?

Have you accessed student support services at your university? If so, which ones? Please describe your experience(s).

- o *Follow-up:* What influenced your decision to use or not use these services?

The principal investigator followed these questions by exploring domains experienced by the cadet, including the perception of service adequacy, service accessibility, and how services might be revised to meet cadet needs, suggestions for improvement, and peer mentorship opportunities.

Researchers manually redacted personal identifying information (PII) from the accurate transcripts produced by the Zoom platform, which was used for conducting and recording interviews. Participants and researcher PII were absent from the data provided to ChatGPT for analysis. The initial prompt provided ChatGPT with its context and role:

> You are an expert in qualitative research, specifically inductive coding of semi-structured interviews. Your task is to analyze the interview data provided and derive meaningful codes, categories, and themes. You will also provide representative quotes from the interviews to illustrate each code and theme.

Detailed elements embedded in the prompt required ChatGPT to generate inductively identified codes (recurring concepts or patterns), produce a codebook that included a code name, definition, and at least one verbatim reinforcing quotation, group the codes into coherent themes, and identify patterns, findings, or emergent issues.

Results

The codebook created through the exploratory use of ChatGPT for inductive qualitative coding includes excerpts from two upper-division Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) cadets. Table 1 displays the unedited codes and definitions produced by ChatGPT based on cadet responses, along with the corresponding representative quotation selected from the interview transcripts.

Table 1
Codebook: ROTC Cadet Experiences

Code	Definition	Representative Quote
Balancing Multiple Commitments	Refers to juggling academic demands, ROTC duties, and personal needs. Includes mentions of time constraints, limited rest, and difficulty meeting deadlines on multiple fronts.	Sometimes I don't get a good amount of sleep… Sometimes I'll get like 3, maybe 4 hours at most.
Time Management & Sacrifice	Encompasses participants' reflections on how they schedule or prioritize responsibilities. Involves sacrificing leisure or sleep to fulfill both academic and military requirements.	I would say 90% of the time, my day is towards either Guard, ROTC, or my schoolwork… The difficulty level, I'd put it at 9 out of 10.
Faculty Understanding & Accommodation	Describes the degree to which faculty members are (or are not) flexible with absences and due dates related to military service, such as mandatory drills or training.	I've heard a few instances from other soldiers… they tried to reschedule a test and the faculty didn't realize that this is a commitment that we can't just turn off.
Need for Faculty Education	Captures the suggestion that faculty may need structured learning opportunities or guidelines about ROTC or National Guard commitments to offer better support.	Perhaps it could be a support service… if faculty had a better understanding that these are hard commitments and hard requirements.
Financial Constraints & Scholarships	Refers to concerns about tuition, fees, and the need for more military-specific scholarships or financial support options beyond the GI Bill or standard ROTC scholarships.	I would say… possibly a lot more veteran scholarships… because a lot of veterans or people in the military… are having to pay almost like 10k out of pocket.
University Veteran Services	Refers to the utilization and	The student lounge is still

Usage	perception of on-campus veteran or military support offices, lounges, or staff services (e.g., for GI Bill processing, advising, or community events).	open, but I don't think it's being used as much as it used to… Some people will come in, use the computers, sit down, but the game system hasn't been used in a while.
Awareness (or lack) of Available Benefits	Highlights instances where participants or their peers did not know about the resources, benefits, or scholarships they were entitled to.	They don't fully know what they have offered to them… Some of them don't know about these certain things they can get because no one really tells them.
Positive Impact of ROTC on Personal Development	Captures how ROTC fosters maturity, leadership skills, and personal growth, as reported by participants who see the program as a transformative experience.	I got the branch I wanted… I've transformed my character, personality, responsibilities… ROTC has been a very good investment.

Generated by ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2025) based on user-provided data.

The emergent codes and supporting quotations reflect the shared experiences of cadets as they strive to balance academic, military, and personal commitments along with their respective interactions (or lack thereof) with the university's student support services. Time management is imperative for cadets due to multiple competing demands, including family, academic, and military obligations. Evidence indicates that faculty lack knowledge regarding the non-negotiable time demands ROTC cadets experience. Additionally, a lack of accessibility and awareness surrounding institutional financial support and scholarships emerges as an unexpected code, particularly since upper-division cadets have access to multiple streams of fiscal academic support.

The researchers engineered a prompt for ChatGPT to conduct the inductive qualitative analysis, which included generating emergent themes, as evidenced by the interview transcripts and Table 1. Next, ChatGPT generated five emergent themes after receiving an engineered prompt to provide a descriptive name for each theme, detailing the codes that form each theme, and succinctly explaining why the selected codes cluster together to reflect each theme's overarching concept. Table 2 displays the unedited ChatGPT-generated thematic results.

Table 2
Themes and Supporting Data

Theme	Codes Included	Explanation
Academic–Military Balance	Balancing Multiple Commitments; Time Management & Sacrifice	These codes collectively illustrate the complexities of fulfilling military obligations while managing academic

		workloads. Participants frequently mention lack of sleep, constant scheduling challenges, and the high difficulty level of combining ROTC with rigorous studies.
Support Systems & Awareness	Awareness (or lack) of Available Benefits; University Veteran Services Usage; Informal Peer Support & Mentorship	These codes focus on participants' use of existing resources (or lack thereof) and highlight how both formal and informal networks offer or fail to offer critical support. They capture experiences with on-campus veteran centers, peer mentorship, and the importance of knowing what resources exist.
Financial & Scholarship Concerns	Financial Constraints & Scholarships	This theme addresses the financial strain felt by cadets and veterans, including out-of-pocket tuition costs and the limited availability of scholarships specifically designated for military-connected students.
Faculty Accommodation & Understanding	Faculty Understanding & Accommodation; Need for Faculty Education	These codes highlight the vital role of faculty awareness and flexibility in enabling students to meet their ROTC or National Guard obligations. They emphasize that better education of faculty could reduce conflicts over missed classes or rescheduled exams.
Personal Growth & Transformation	Positive Impact of ROTC on Personal Development	This theme captures the more optimistic and affirming aspects of the ROTC experience, describing how rigorous training and leadership responsibilities can lead to significant personal and professional development.

Generated by ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2025) based on user-provided data.

Discussion

ChatGPT and Qualitative Analysis

This exploratory study deployed ChatGPT to pilot test the capacity of large language models (LLMs) and generative artificial intelligence to process qualitative data effectively. Recent literature found ChatGPT advantageous in all stages of qualitative coding and analysis, especially as a second coder (Bijker et al., 2024). ChatGPT may enhance qualitative analysis by assisting researchers in identifying significant codes and details that might otherwise be overlooked in manual analyses, increasing research productivity and the ability to efficiently process large data sets (Turobov et al., 2024). Additionally, generative artificial intelligence and LLMs provide researchers with evidence beyond existing coding software by enhancing process efficiency, offering insights unavailable through conventional platforms, and improving coding transparency (Nguyen-Trung, 2024). The utilization of ChatGPT for qualitative analysis remains in its formative stage and must be used judiciously. Human oversight and collaboration are necessary due to potential errors in quotations and code naming (Turobov et al., 2024). Researchers deploying artificial intelligence for qualitative analysis must focus on prompt engineering design and the platform's capacity (Zhang et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2021). End user concerns include, but are not limited to, ChatGPT's transparency (interpretability and verifiability), performance (consistency and accuracy), the difficulty of designing prompts, and the cost of reviewing results (Zhang et al., 2023).

Navigating Dual Commitments in Higher Education

This limited qualitative pilot study explored ROTC cadets' perceptions of the efficacy and efficiency of student support services for their specific population at a regional public university. As ROTC commissions approximately 70% of all Army officers (United States Army, 2019), facilitating a successful academic journey benefits the cadet, the institution, the Army, and the nation. Although based on a minimal data set, this study generated five themes for future research in this area: Academic-Military Balance (the complexities of fulfilling military obligations while managing academic workloads), Support Systems & Awareness (the use of existing resources, formal and informal networks, peer mentorship), Financial & Scholarship Concerns (financial strain, limited military-connected scholarships), Faculty Accommodation & Understanding (faculty awareness and flexibility related to military obligations), and Personal Growth & Transformation (the optimistic and affirming aspects of the ROTC experience). The emergence of financial concerns among ROTC cadets was an unexpected finding given the fiscal support available through ROTC, the institution, and the Army Reserve or National Guard.

Future research must consider the barriers to ROTC cadet research: the availability and willingness of cadets to participate and multiple levels of research approval (institutional, US Army Cadet Command, the Army Human Research Protections Office). A promise exists in future research that extends the application of Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory (2000) to ROTC cadets and institutional support services, as the five themes identified in this exploratory study inform cadet competence, autonomy, and relatedness.

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College Teaching as a Form of Scholarship: Does It differ with Adult Students?

Alan Mandell & Xenia Coulter

Abstract

Building upon last year's AHEA conference presentation on the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), we argue that the unfortunate consequence of adding student learning to the definition of scholarly teaching has been to convert teaching scholarship into a form of education research. Scholarship of teaching (SoT) on its own is not a form of knowledge-creation, but a professional practice, performative inquiry, or in Schön's words, reflection-in-action, much like that displayed years ago in Dewey's Chicago laboratory school. SoT in that guise, in addition to disciplinary mastery and up- to-date pedagogical knowledge, requires a keen understanding of the interests, capabilities, and purposes of individual students. In this year's presentation, we expected to explore how student age differences might impact SoT. Instead, the discussion focused upon the general challenges of SoT, especially today when too often the student world seems distant from that of academia.

Key words: Scholarship of university teaching, SoTL, Dewey, Boyer, reflection-in-action

Background

Last year we described our initial foray into the concept of college teaching as a potential form of scholarship worthy of recognition. In our 2024 AHEA presentation (see Coulter and Mandell, 2024), we noted an astonishingly high level of scholarly activity displayed by the philosopher, John Dewey, subject matter experts, and practicing teachers as they planned, carried out, and revised the learning activities that defined Dewey's Chicago laboratory school (see Mayhew & Edwards, 2007/1936). The results of this seven-year experiment were reflected in the many scholarly papers and books Dewey published during and after the school's years of operation.[1] In our presentation, we also described some of our misgivings about the modern-day expression of the so-called scholarship of teaching and learning (or SoTL), which was promoted more than 30 years ago by the then-president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Ernest Boyer (1990).

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[1] See e.g., Dewey's *School and Society*, *Democracy and Education*, and *Experience and Education*, plus essays in Vol 5 of Boydston's *Early Works of John Dewey*, and Vol. 1-3 of Boydston's *Middle Works of John Dewey*.

Boyer sought to distinguish the scholarship of teaching from what he called the scholarship of discovery—i.e., disciplinary research—which then—and still today—is the only kind of scholarship that regularly receives significant acknowledgement.
Specifically, he sought to widen the university faculty reward system to include scholarly activities in service (i.e., application and disciplinary integration), discovery, and, of course, teaching. Admirable as his intentions were, he provided little in the way of definitional detail, so that as the idea of scholarly teaching took hold, *student learning* was added to the meaning of teaching*,* while at the same time, scientific methodology was increasingly understood to be integral to the definition of scholarship. While these additions clearly enhanced the "rigor" of whatever scholarship teaching involved, in truth, they have served to direct attention away from the kind of scholarship we saw in Dewey's work in education, as well as in the writings of Boyer (1990, 1997).

In the year since our 2024 AHEA presentation, we broadened our investigation of the SoTl literature and sharpened our understanding of the ways in which SoTL conflated *scholarship* with *science,* which we now could see made it nearly impossible to distinguish the scholarship of teaching from that of discovery. One misdirecting problem that we identified last year was that the inclusion of student learning assumed that the objective of good teaching was to improve student learning outcomes. As such, any claim of improvement demanded properly controlled (i.e., rigorous) results. Another related misdirecting problem was that for these findings to be accepted, it was required that they be subject to peer review and publication (see Coulter & Mandell, in review). Thus, instead of scholarly teaching being understood as a unique form of inquiry, it was repeatedly defined as a form of *knowledge-creation*, which in effect was just another example of Boyer's scholarship of discovery.

Once we eliminated the inclusion of student learning and the necessity of publication, once we could then step back and look at teaching as a form of scholarship in its own right, and once we were able to recognize that teaching can be understood as expert or professional acts encompassing the wide range of activities that teaching demands (see, e.g., Fenstermacher, 1986), the writings of Donald Schön about "reflective practitioners" (1983, 1987) provided important additional support. Schön (who, not incidentally, was greatly influenced by John Dewey, see Schön,1992) helped us reconceptualize the scholarship involved in university teaching such that it was wholly commensurate with what was displayed by the teachers in Dewey's Chicago school, as in the following list:

- A deep and broad knowledge of the teacher's discipline
- A concurrent knowledge of teaching methods and technologies

- Advanced-level skills in being able to relate or apply individual student interests, concerns, and purposes, to the basic questions and aims of discipline under study.

In essence, we now regard the scholarship of teaching (SoT), in contrast to "knowledge-creation," as being a form of scholarly practice—such as is particularly evident in the college-level teaching of creative writing, music performance, and the visual arts. Other terms might be *performative inquiry* (Fels & Belliveau, 2008, as cited by Judson, 2023), or, in Schön's words (1983, 1987), *reflection-in-action.* The scholarly quality of this practice, performance, or action rests critically upon the depth and breadth of the teacher's knowledge of their discipline, mastery of pedagogical methods, and—most importantly—understanding of their individual students' states of mind.

It was the latter component that we sought to explore with the AHEA participants this year. Could our overall effort to re-understand the nature of scholarly teaching help us to better design and carry out the work we do with our adult students? What specific aspects or attributes of individual students are relevant and important to know in order to capture their attention and willingness to further engage in a subject area? In particular, besides obviously relevant student characteristics—e.g., academic skills, prior experience, and cultural background—does age matter? In other words, is teaching practice affected differently with students who are traditionally aged (i.e., "emerging" adults) as compared to those who are mature adults?

As at prior conferences, the objective of our presentation was not so much to dwell upon our new insights about the scholarship of teaching, as to stimulate our audience—university faculty and instructors who know well forms of student diversity that benefit from individualized attention —to share their perspectives and raise their own questions. The goal, of course, was for all of us to expand our general understanding of SoT as we currently conceptualize it.

The Discussion that Ensued

Photograph by Kathy Peno

We had anticipated a very small number of participants (because our session was scheduled during the last hours of the conference), but unexpectedly the group was sizeable and highly varied as seen above. Due in part to the number of participants and to a relatively short amount

of time, not too surprisingly, the questions we proposed to discuss were set aside in order to explore a number of the initial concerns and issues that arose which related to defining and implementing effective college-level teaching. These concerns were clearly stimulated by ever more questions raised today about the value and worth of a college degree (see, e.g., Laff & Carlson, 2025).

A major discussion point centered upon the contrast between our view of scholarly teaching and the so-called "transmission model" of teaching where the faculty objective is to develop varied "disciplinary literacies" in graduating students. What purpose is achieved by requiring students to acquire accurate and detailed understandings of disciplinary content and manner of inquiry, which by definition ignores the student's state of mind, past experiences, or current concerns? What is lost—or added—when instead, teachers try to match student dispositions and interests to the more basic human questions their disciplines represent?

Many of the participants agreed that more important than the acquisition of multiple disciplinary literacies, today's students need to broaden their curiosity and to strengthen their ability to ask "educative" questions. (According to Dewey, such questions produce answers that open up further areas of investigation rather than close down the inquiry.) Those present also emphasized the importance of acquiring better general skills in reading, communication, investigation, analysis, and reasoning. Rather than gaining disciplinary knowledge, we noted that such general skills also seem to be a much higher priority for employers (Finley, 2021).

The importance of attending to student state of mind had already emerged in many of the prior presentations at the conference with its focus upon the university experience of military students (and their families, including veterans). The often-rarified world of academia can be extremely off-putting to those who come from other worlds.

Experiencing their own inadequacy, sense of not belonging, resentment at being seen as inferior, students find it very difficult to engage in materials that seem irrelevant, even meaningless, especially in their initial encounters with higher education. How can faculty reach across that divide? Should we become as much advisors or counselors as we are teachers? Is that the shift we should be making in our understanding of our roles? Are we even qualified to take on these additional roles? Even so, what are the personal and institutional boundaries we need to establish, if any? Assuming we are willing to accommodate our disciplinary objectives to the unique experiences of our students, are our institutions capable of providing the kinds of support that complement our own efforts?

Given the individualized demands and needs of our diverse adult population of students, can teaching still be viewed as a form of scholarship? Do we see ourselves as scholars in that context? Do our students see us that way? Is the divide between teacher-as-scholar and student-as-amateur helpful? Or could such a division serve to disengage the student from the academy even more than the cultural differences we already experience? After all, doesn't this distinction reflect somewhat of a patronizing perspective? Perhaps instead of "helping" or "guiding" our students, should we turn to some of the original thinking by Knowles (e.g., 2025),

even more so Lindeman (1926), where adult students are identified not by what they *don't* know, but what they *do* know?

Can we find a way of teaching that views teacher-student relationships in a more collaborative way? Would that not also offer a more effective approach in developing a true scholarship of teaching?

Final Thoughts

What stood out for all of us when the discussion was forced to end, long before any reasonable conclusion could be drawn, was the value and further need for more such discussion. What was evident throughout the session was a deep and earnest desire to share our beliefs and to re-examine our methods, our priorities, and our purposes for higher education today. Much of the scholarly teaching literature refers to the value of "community-of-practice" opportunities (Wenger, 1998) and the need not for webinars, but face-to-face communication among practitioners—teachers—across our varied institutions. Yet again, we are reminded of the Dewey school which one could argue was established and cemented by weekly, sometimes even daily, discussions among the teachers, staff, and administrators.

Perhaps AHEA can find ways of expanding such opportunities at our conferences. The conference day could be extended into the dinner hour or even the evening with daily opportunities to talk together about critical issues emerging from the presentations. As Thompson recently argued in an *Atlantic Monthly* article (2025), our social world is turning into an increasingly "degraded public space," and "we are only now coming to grips with the negative externalities" of such a world. Such moves by AHEA to enrich our own public space through informal interactions may positively impact our teaching practices that are both complex and deserving of ongoing attention. In so doing, the value of higher education may become more evident not only to ourselves but to our adult students.

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Mission to Graduate: Empowering Military Members in Higher Education

Tammarra. Letbetter,Tremaine Leslie, and Kayla Garrison

Abstract

Military-affiliated students encounter distinct challenges when transitioning into higher education, particularly when balancing academic demands with service obligations and psychological adjustments. This article explores these transitional barriers and emphasizes the role of educational institutions in supporting military learners through evidence-based interventions. These include culturally responsive mentorship, benefit navigation, and structured support systems. Mental health, identity transition, and academic integration are explored through the lens of institutional responsibility and social justice. This paper advocates for a holistic and inclusive model to facilitate military-to-civilian academic transitions.

Keywords: Veterans, Higher Education, Transition, Mentorship, Mental Health

Introduction

Military-affiliated students—those actively serving or previously enlisted—navigate a dual identity as scholars and service members. Their lived experiences influence not only their academic engagement but also the level of institutional support they require to thrive (Barry, Whiteman, & Wadsworth, 2014). Their motivations for pursuing higher education often include career advancement, identity transformation, and personal fulfillment beyond military life (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009). Understanding the multifaceted roles these students occupy provides the foundation for an inclusive and adaptive higher education framework (Rivas, Martinez, & Kim, 2023).

Challenges for Military Students in Higher Education

A significant portion of the challenges stems from institutional inflexibility. Policies often do not accommodate the unique timelines and responsibilities associated with military life. For instance, rigid attendance requirements and lack of virtual learning alternatives may jeopardize academic standing for students who must attend military training or be deployed on short notice (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Cook & Kim, 2009). Student veterans may confront a hidden curriculum of academic expectations not clearly communicated, including norms of participation, writing styles, and instructor engagement. This lack of cultural translation can lead to misunderstandings, misalignment of expectations, and student attrition (Kirchner, 2015).

Unexpected deployments and training schedules often disrupt the academic progress of military students, making it difficult to maintain consistency in coursework. These interruptions can result in course withdrawals, incomplete grades, and delayed graduation, ultimately affecting eligibility for financial aid and student retention. To support these learners, faculty must adopt flexible, proactive approaches that acknowledge the realities of military obligations. Policies such as allowing makeup work, offering asynchronous learning options, and maintaining open lines of communication can mitigate the academic impact of service-related disruptions. When institutions combine structural flexibility with compassionate understanding, they create a more equitable

learning environment that supports the success of military-affiliated students (Barry, Whiteman, & Wadsworth, 2014).

Demographics and Strengths of Military Students

Veterans and military-affiliated individuals generally possess unique strengths that enrich academic communities. According to the Postsecondary National Policy Institute (2020), over 650,000 veterans used military education benefits in 2018. These students tend to be older, more likely to have families, and often juggle employment and education simultaneously. Despite challenges, their graduation rates often exceed those of traditional and other adult learners (Cate, 2014). The complexity of veteran transitions underscores the urgent need for institutions to reevaluate traditional academic structures. Simply recognizing the presence of military-affiliated students is not enough; meaningful adjustments must be embedded at every level of policy and practice.

Institutions must implement systemic changes that go beyond accommodations and aim for true inclusivity. This includes developing faculty training programs focused on military culture, establishing dedicated veteran resource centers, and designing curriculum pathways that acknowledge prior military learning. Flexible course scheduling, hybrid instruction models, and priority enrollment are also practical strategies that can ease the transition for veterans juggling work, family, and lingering service-related obligations. By proactively addressing these needs, colleges and universities not only support student success but also reinforce their commitment to equity and access in higher education (Cook & Kim, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008).

Psychosocial and academic Transitions

Beyond structural barriers, veterans often carry the psychological weight of combat exposure and post-deployment reintegration, both of which can significantly affect their emotional readiness for academic life (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). These internal struggles may manifest as anxiety, hypervigilance, or difficulty concentrating in classroom settings—challenges that traditional campus support systems are not always prepared to address. Feelings of disconnection from civilian peers, especially within younger student populations, can further compound a veteran's sense of isolation, diminishing their engagement and motivation. To foster genuine inclusion, institutions must provide comprehensive, trauma-informed services that not only address emotional well-being but also affirm veterans lived experiences. At the same time, it is crucial to recognize the resilience, leadership, and discipline that veterans contribute to academic environments. When higher education embraces both the challenges and strengths veterans bring, it lays the groundwork for a culture of belonging and long-term success.

Strategies for Institutional Support

Institutions can embed support mechanisms by implementing military cultural competency training for faculty and staff, ensuring all stakeholders understand the behavioral norms, strengths, and potential psychological traumas that may impact military learners (Kirchner, 2015). Academic advising should be proactive and trauma-informed, integrating early alert systems and personalized support plans that acknowledge both academic and emotional readiness (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

Veteran Resource Centers (VRCs) serve as essential hubs, offering academic support, peer mentoring, benefit counseling, and emotional wellness programming—all of which contribute to increased retention and degree completion among military-affiliated students (Barry, Whiteman, & Wadsworth, 2014). Furthermore, universities can partner with external organizations such as the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Student Veterans of America (SVA), and the American Council on Education to streamline benefit access and develop cohesive national support networks (Cook & Kim, 2009).

Counselors and advisors must also assist veterans in navigating bureaucratic systems like the Veteran Affairs and promote engagement with holistic resources such as Military OneSource and Vet Centers (Military OneSource, 2023). The complexity of these transitions calls for institutional models that are not only flexible, but also intentionally designed to honor the lived experiences of veterans. Support structures must be multi-dimensional and culturally informed to be truly effective. When higher education institutions align services with veterans' needs and strengths, they create environments where these students can thrive academically and personally (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009).

Conclusion

This paper makes clear that empowering military students requires more than symbolic gestures of appreciation. It necessitates structural change, policy shifts, and a cultural reckoning within academic institutions (Kirchner, 2015). Higher education must recognize the distinctive lived experiences of military-affiliated students and respond with intentionality, embedding support throughout policies, programs, and pedagogy (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008).

Future research should examine long-term outcomes for military students based on the level of institutional support received, including retention, graduation, and post-graduation employment data (Cate, 2014). Additionally, student voices should guide the evolution of support systems, ensuring that services are not only offered but also accessible, relevant, and transformative (Barry, Whiteman, & Wadsworth, 2014). The complexity of veteran transitions underscores the need for comprehensive, coordinated institutional responses. Further institutional adjustments are necessary to ensure military-affiliated students can succeed and thrive beyond the uniform (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009).

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Bridging the Generation Gap: Fostering Belonging in a Multigenerational PhD Writing Cohort

Kelly L. Richmond, Hayley Lochotzki, Melissa A. Willis, Natakki A Jones, Sharon S. Dantuono, and Kayon Murray-Johnson

Abstract

What happens when a multigenerational cohort of PhD students with diverse cultural, academic, and professional backgrounds converge in an academic writing course and build a community? This paper draws on Collaborative Autoethnography (CAE) created by Chang et al. (2013) and is grounded in a community of practice framework to explore the experiences of first-year doctoral learners in education as they navigate and construct a sense of belonging. Academic identity development, persistence, and success in doctoral programs are often hindered by isolation and lack of community, conditions rooted in absence of belonging, which is critical for the unique challenges of the doctoral journey (Emmioğlu et al., 2017). These issues are especially critical in academic writing courses, where students are actively forming their scholarly identities as writers. Preliminary findings indicate that belonging is shaped by a combination of individual characteristics, intentional course design, and community interaction.

Keywords*:* Belonging, Multigenerational, PhD Writing Cohort, Collaborative Autoethnography

Introduction and Statement of the Problem

Success in doctoral programs demands intellectual rigor, personal sacrifice, and constant self-reflection. It also requires a sense of belonging. This is defined as "perceived social support… a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about" (Strayhorn, 2018, p. 4). Doctoral students' sense of belonging in academia is strongly associated with their scholarly identity, giving them a sense of legitimacy and "feeling like an academic" (Emmioğlu et al., 2017). Yet nearly 50% of PhD students leave without completing their degrees, often due to feelings of isolation and disconnection rooted in a lack of belonging (Gardner, 2009; Cassuto, 2013). Attrition rates for *first-year* doctoral students range between 35% and 57% depending on discipline (e.g., Wolfe et al., 2023).

In academic writing classrooms, community and belonging are critical components of success. Writing is central to doctoral work, identity development and the trajectory to becoming independent researchers (Inouye & Mcalpine, 2019). Studies show doctoral writing is experienced as a journey where trust and peer support is essential for success (deCaux & Pretorius, 2024; Hradsky et al, 2022). It remains important to continue exploring how belonging and community support can be cultivated in doctoral writing spaces. Further, to the best of our knowledge, how this develops in doctoral writing classrooms, particularly from the perspective of multigenerational adult learners, has been examined far less. Thus, the purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how multigenerational first-year PhD adult learners perceive and experience belonging in an academic reading and writing course. The study is on-going and this manuscript represents preliminary findings We believe these findings may begin to offer insights into strategies that can

be used to support belonging, identity development, and learning in first-year doctoral writing contexts. Findings may also have implications for combatting learner attrition, academic writing support challenges, and imposter syndrome for multigenerational adults.

Summary of Literature Connections

Belonging is a well-established central tenet of student success in higher education. Strayhorn (2018) defines belonging in academic settings as a "perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about" (p. 4). While his work primarily focuses on undergraduates, its relevance extends to graduate students, where the stakes of disconnection are often higher and more isolating. Writing is central to doctoral study and doctoral student identity; belonging appears core to successfully building both. Arguably, the writing journey is situated in an experience that cannot be completely detached from some element of community or system. One scholar put it this way: "as students navigate doctoral work, they are learning what is entailed in being an academic by engaging with their peers and more experienced academics within their community. They are also personally and directly experiencing the rewards as well as the challenges related to doing academic work" (Sarikaya et al., 2017, p.1). Others "situate" the concept of 'becoming' a scholar as one that intersects with a developing belongingness (Benton & Marwah, 2023).

Several benefits are linked to academic writing with community and belonging in mind. For example, Hradsky et al. (2022) shared that positioning doctoral writing groups as communities can play a significant role in fostering both academic and personal growth, as well as identity development. Activities such as sharing experiences and engaging in self-reflection help students recognize themselves as valued members of the community. This sense of belonging is particularly important given the well-documented isolation and unique challenges that doctoral students face. As students navigate these obstacles together, especially in the context of writing, the experience can be transformative, strengthening their academic identity.

Furthermore, collaborative writing within these groups can help students build social capital and resilience, while also providing emotional support, which is often essential for successful independent writing. Additionally, fostering virtual or social media communities–and promoting self-efficacy in academic writing for doctor of philosophy (PhD) distance learners are important benefits (Mandalawi et al., 2022). When students see themselves as capable writers within a supportive community, they're more likely to develop positive writer identities and persist through their program (Ebejer, 2022).

In contrast, when doctoral students lack a sense of belonging, outcomes include isolation, imposter syndrome, and attrition. Graduate programs are frequently structured around individual achievement, competition, and independence leading to isolation. Research shows doctoral students who feel isolated are more likely to experience burnout, mental health challenges, and attrition (Gardner, 2009). Vaccaro, Daly-Cano, and Newman (2015) further argue that belonging is especially critical for students with marginalized identities, who must navigate both academic pressures and social exclusion. A lack of belonging can lead to imposter syndrome where individuals experience self-doubt and feel like a fraud–even when they're successful.

Scholars like Cassuto (2013) critique the traditional graduate education model as outdated and unsustainable, calling for a "more humane" graduate experience that aligns with students' lived realities. He emphasizes that doctoral students are not merely scholars-in-training, but dynamic people, often balancing caregiving, work, and financial pressures. Adult education theorists agree about the need to consider load and balance (e.g., McClusky, 1970). "Humane" approaches invite programs to reconsider how community, flexibility, and self-care can be built into the curriculum, especially in diverse cohorts. Finally, multigenerational learning communities offer a unique lens through which to examine belonging. Research in adult education suggests that intergenerational learning can foster empathy, deepen learning, and increase engagement (Krause, 2007; Merriam & Bierema, 2014). However, age-diverse cohorts can also introduce challenges, particularly when assumptions or biases about age and academic ability go unaddressed. Together, key connections to the literature underscore a continuing need to center belonging for doctoral writing experiences as a foundation for persistence, wellness, and scholarly growth–not an afterthought.

Methods and Theoretical Frame

This qualitative study uses Collective Autoethnography (Chang et al., 2013) as a method and Situated Learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) as a theoretical frame. CAE engages researchers as participants in a deeper self-reflective exploration of the topic or issue at hand and of their own assumptions and perspectives (Chang et al., 2013; Noel et al., 2023). Studies have found it meaningful for displaying important intersections and relationships, to include belonging and inclusion in doctoral student academic writing (e.g., Benton & Marwah, 2023). Concerning theory, situated learning, and specifically its community of practice (CoP) tenets frame this work: *domain* as academic writing, *community* as the participants in course related spaces and *practice* as the co-construction of activities and writing interactions in those spaces. In combining method and theory, we hope for a deeper understanding of how belonging is experienced through personal and collective engagement.

Context and Participants

Our multigenerational cohort of PhD students in education at a New England state university forms the context for this work. In our first semester, writing became more than an academic task – it became a communal practice. The cohort of 14 PhD students spans four generations of adult learners–Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z. Each brings with them diverse life experiences, responsibilities, and identities. While this generational diversity enriches discussion, it can also intensify feelings of self-doubt and impostor syndrome.

In response, cohort members intentionally worked to cultivate mutual support and affirm that everyone's voice matters. From this shared commitment, five of us, three White women from Generation X, one White woman from the Millennial generation, and one Black woman from Generation Z, conducted a collaborative ethnography. We explored our lived experiences as academic writers and community members through regular reflective writing, group dialog, and thematic analysis of our shared narratives. Our research focused on two guiding questions: How do members of a multigenerational PhD cohort experience and construct/develop a sense of belonging within an academic writing course? In what ways do generational differences impact community-building and academic identity and culture?

Participants in this collaborative ethnography represented three different generations and brought a range of disciplinary backgrounds and prior academic experiences. Kelly, a White woman from Generation X, holds advanced degrees in Educational Psychology and Operations Management. Hayley, a White Millennial woman, has a graduate background in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). Melissa, a White woman from Generation X, holds an undergraduate degree in music education and a Master's degree in adult education. Sharon, also a White woman from Generation X, holds advanced degrees in Communication Disorders and Educational Administration. Natakki, a Black woman from Generation Z, holds graduate level degrees and expertise in Elementary Education.

In line with data source recommendations from Chang et al. (2013), each researcher participant independently engaged in writing critical incidents, responding to self-reflective qualitative survey prompts, and reviewing each other's responses around belonging, writing and multigenerational dynamics. We also participated in two focus groups. Data analysis was guided by Saldana's (2019) coding techniques; we engaged several rounds of independent coding, then met to negotiate categories and emerging themes. Excerpts from preliminary findings on question one are described next.

Findings

Preliminary findings from our study of a doctoral writing cohort revealed several emergent themes: personality culture, informational sharing, and collaboration. Personality culture reflected the ways individual dispositions shaped group dynamics, suggesting that who we are, as writers, scholars, and people, directly influenced the tone and cohesion of the cohort. Informational sharing emerged through the exchange of resources, writing strategies, and advice, often occurring informally and organically. Collaboration extended beyond structured group tasks to include peer feedback, mutual encouragement, and the shared accountability that helped many participants stay motivated. Frequently coded elements included "kindness," "informal communication," "Slack," "activities," and "projects."

Informal communication such as Slack, a cloud-based AI-powered team communication platform developed by Slack Technologies, was surprisingly important, while other findings were consistent with expectations based on the literature review (Slack, n.d.). Kindness appeared in small but meaningful gestures such as words of encouragement, offers to read drafts, or simply checking in on one another. Informal communication, particularly through Slack, proved more significant than anticipated. Although typically viewed as a productivity tool, Slack became a central hub for casual conversations, spontaneous support, and the cultivation of community (Slack, n.d.). While many findings aligned with expectations based on the literature, the strong role of informal, digitally mediated interaction in fostering connection and motivation was particularly striking. These observations raise further questions: How does personality culture function in virtual academic spaces? What kinds of informal practices sustain writing and emotional support in peer groups? Framing these insights within the context of an educational doctoral writing community will be essential as we continue to analyze the data and refine our understanding.

Personality Culture

Most individual cohort members' personalities had a positive impact on belonging. Throughout the written narratives and critical incidents, a number of codes referenced "kindness" and feelings of "being encouraged" as a (normal) part of their approach. Melissa reflected on her level of comfort in reaching out to her classmates for feedback on her writing, and recalls:

> I've experienced gentle and kind feedback from my fellow classmates which has really improved my writing skills!…My fellow students have also noticed and respected the way my individual voice speaks through my writing. In other words, I never needed to worry or feel embarrassed when sharing my writing with others in the group.

This quote epitomizes the level of comfort and sense of belonging we felt as researcher-participants. Melissa's reflection that in a different learning situation, she may have experienced discomfort or embarrassment sometimes associated with asking for writing feedback or support, made a culture of belonging via kindness even more clear.

Kindness also emerged as a strong "culture" of the class - evidenced by for e.g., the consistent verbal encouragement or redirection without harsh criticism. This, in turn, helped us feel included. One of our older Generation X participants, Sharon, had a clear sense of this when she walked into her first class, stating,

> I walked into the only class I registered for, still debating if I was going to drop it and not bother. Because of this cohort, I left this class and signed up for another class [in the program].

Interactions and feelings of welcome at the onset of a course can help build a welcoming environment, leading to a sense of involvement, desire to participate and ultimately a sense of belonging. When that early welcome culture is enhanced, it becomes an inclusive environment encouraging feelings of worth and value for learners while holding potential to build collaborative relationships. Students do not have to feel alone in an intimidating program, as Hayley reflects on the welcoming of other students, "That is when it hit me: I am not alone."

Information Sharing

Belongingness can be created and nurtured both inside and outside of the classroom. Overwhelmingly, participants shared that a sense of belonging was fostered in our cohort outside the classroom through the digital platform Slack. On Slack, learners created channels for each class in which everyone could join to discuss various topics, from questions about assignments to things we did during the weekend to venting frustrations (Slack, n.d.). Natakki wrote:

> During the semester, we often helped clarify information, exchanged work for peer edits and revisions, and supported each other when needed. My older cohort members and I exchanged information, knowledge, and experience, which helped each other throughout the semester in class.

This mutual community-building experience, though informal, allowed for multiple types of networks, relationships and learning experiences. The opportunity to share information outside of the classroom helped to diminish moments of confusion and isolation, helping to bring the cohort together, regardless of age or academic writing stage.

Collaboration

One Gen-X student was initially concerned that an age gap might create barriers to connection and collaboration with younger peers. She imagined she might have little in common with younger generations and feared feeling isolated. Ironically, we found multiple age groups shared similar sentiments and wrestled with the sense of not being or having "enough."

However, those concerns quickly diminished as the cohort began to engage in collaborative writing and peer support. Activities and projects like team teaching difficult concepts and brainstorming and reviewing in varying small groups resonated with us. The generational diversity of the group proved to be a strength rather than a limitation as we each got a chance to lead and therefore learn from each other; potential for meaningful academic and social connections were fostered across generations. As Kelly reflected, "We were able to collaborate fully and that made all the difference. Not only were we classmates—we became friends."

Implications and Conclusion

Through this study, researcher-participants found that belonging in a multigenerational doctoral writing classroom is fostered through intentional engagement of faculty, peers, and self. Each of these three sources contributes to a culture of belonging through positive feedback, information sharing, and collaboration.

Although this is a preliminary qualitative study, our findings highlight key practices that support belonging and reduce imposter syndrome, especially for multigenerational learners. Future research could explore how belonging evolves over time, how writing development and confidence intersect, and how informal community tools shape doctoral persistence.

First, faculty can create interactive lessons and intentionally build writing courses as communities of practice. Second, learners can utilize effective communication platforms such as Slack to engage and support each other informally. Finally, faculty and students can build self-confidence through encouragement. It is important to remember that being selected for a doctoral program is itself a reflection of belonging.

More research is needed on belonging and academic writing within multigenerational graduate cohorts across adult higher education contexts. Collaborative Autoethnography (CAE) offers a valuable method for lived experiences and shared meaning. Because writing is central to scholarly identity, and often a significant challenge, future studies might examine the relationship between persistence, writing development, and belonging over time. Cultivating belonging may not only improve academic writing outcomes but also promote long-term success for multigenerational adult learners.

Our experience underscores that age diversity can enrich, rather than hinder, the graduate school experience. Bridging the well-documented "belonging gap" in the doctoral journey requires both formal and informal engagement, and a commitment to community. We hope to continue our analysis and further explore how multigenerational diversity shapes connection and supports academic writing communities. For our cohort, what began with uncertainty became a transformative experience of community, demonstrating that generational diversity is not a barrier but a bridge.

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Beyond the Uniform: Fostering Community and Belonging for Student Veterans in Higher Education

Brad Wojtiuk, Jacob Miltenberger, and Tammy Moscato

Abstract

More than half of veterans transition out of the military and enter higher education. This paper references an existing framework called the CARES (Amboy & Taylor, 2022), alongside its younger counterpart; the MORE, model to support student veterans. Tinto's Integration Theory combined with Schlossberg's Transition Theory is discussed on how student veterans can transition socially and become integrated academically. Student veterans may not feel connected with students who do not share lived experiences as they do, so this paper provides recommendations from empirical sources such as having a space for student veterans to get acclimated to higher education to avoid feelings of isolation and unwelcomeness.

Introduction

With around 200,000 veterans transitioning out of the military each year, approximately 115,000 pursue higher education (Schmeling & Maury, 2019). As the number of student veterans grows, many seek higher education to improve career opportunities, acquire new skills, and transition their military experiences into civilian life. This paper will examine the experiences of student veterans using Tinto's Theory of Student Integration, which emphasizes the importance of academic and social integration for student success. Additionally, the paper will incorporate the C.A.R.E.S. and M.O.R.E. models, specifically focusing on the "Encouragement" and "Community" aspects of C.A.R.E.S., as well as the "Empathy" aspect of M.O.R.E., to better understand how these frameworks can support student veterans' integration into college life.

Transitioning

For veterans, one of the most significant impacts on education is how one transitions from a highly stratified and structured organization with a regimented hierarchy, such as the military, to a more abstract liberal arts education. To this end, Vincent Tinto's theory of integration (1993) has been frequently cited as a framework for retention and encouraging persistence. Tinto simplistically breaks down integration as students engage in three stages of passage (separation, transition, and incorporation) (Yasso, 2009; Museus, 2017). Though this theory neatly encapsulates how one could go about a sense of belonging, its ignorance to the racial climate and structural barriers make it an easy target to other schools of thought (Yasso,2009; Nunez, 2009; Museus, 2017) . Its detractors point to the theory which makes students assimilate into the dominant culture to be successful. This poses issues with groups of multifaceted identities. It is important to note that veteran identity, though seen as a holistic identity, oftentimes encapsulates other marginalized identities that are salient to the veteran. In other words, the veteran learner does not have their veteran identity taking effect on them in a vacuum but has multiple identities, which they are privy to as a student, such as being seen as non-traditional aged students, their ethnic identity, and their status as a first-generation student. Schlossberg takes many of the same constructs and fills in the gaps that Tinto fails to address. Noting that students respond differently to integration at different

parts of their lives. Tierney and Jung (1998) point to Tinto's overemphasis on behavior such as faculty interaction and missing key factors such as family involvement, cultural capital framework (1977), and preparedness for college. This coalesces in veterans in need of support to prevent what Jung et al., refers to as "culture shock" (2023).

Academic Integration

Student veterans are their own unique population. When considering their educational and transitional needs, there is no one-size-fits-all approach (Semer & Harmening, 2015). It is important for educators, student affairs professionals, and campus partners to remember that all individuals have a range of identities, and that their military connectedness represents only one (Benbow & Lee, 2022). Schlossberg's transition theory works within the framework that students respond to transition differently at different points in their lives. This framework highlights how individuals acclimate and adjust to transition in personal and unique ways that differ from the ways in which others navigate and adapt throughout their transition.

There are multiple challenges that Veterans and other post-traditional students have in common when transitioning to, or returning to, higher education. These may include delayed enrollment, outside work responsibilities, transfer status and transferability of credits, as well as commuter status (Barry et al., 2014). Semer and Harmening found that student Veterans do not expect or desire special treatment, their shared expectation is that faculty members appreciate their circumstances including their academic challenges, family obligations, and work expectations (2015). Many Veterans entering institutions of higher education bring with them advanced teamwork and problem-solving skills, exceptional medical training, or in-depth knowledge in technological related fields with extensive experience in multiple applications, all sought after attributes that prepare them for multiple career paths (Benbow & Hora, 2018; Werum et al., 2020). The life experience they bring with them is shaped by their maturational level, world view, and existing beliefs regarding the impact of furthering their education (Soares et al., 2017).

Multiple studies provide valuable insight regarding the success of post-traditional learners (Soares et al., 2017). Veterans appreciate receiving oral feedback from faculty members regarding their academic accomplishments and performance, so much so that feedback stands out as a powerful influence on achievement (Semer & Harmening, 2015) When faculty members are willing to provide feedback and positive reinforcement student veterans gain confidence and additional support in dealing with academic transitions (Semer & Harmening, 2015). This type of support highlights Schlossberg's (1989) findings that 'supports' include emotional support and networks.

Social Integration

Unlike traditional college students, who are generally between 18 and 22, student veterans are typically aged 24-40, with 62% being first-generation college students (VA, 2023). These post-traditional students often need help engaging with their peers, who may not share their experiences. Tinto (1975) highlights that a lack of social integration can lead to feelings of isolation, increasing the risk of dropout. Developing a strong sense of belonging is crucial for student veterans to form positive community bonds with peers who share their identity. Brad Carney, an Army veteran who earned his degree from Dartmouth College, attributes much of his success to the strong community

he found through the Veterans Office. His experiences suggest that veterans' offices provide essential spaces for social interaction and peer support, which is vital for integration (Jung et al., 2023). However, student veterans can struggle with discomfort in social situations, especially when they face intrusive questions about their military service or are expected to have extensive knowledge due to their past experiences. These challenges can make it difficult for veterans to integrate fully into college life (Borsari et al., 2017). As a result, some veterans may downplay their military identity, caught between two conflicting roles: one as a student navigating higher education and another as a person with a unique set of experiences.

Additionally, increased accessibility to on and off-campus social support networks and assistance in building social capital can increase feelings of inclusivity and adaptation. Providing on-campus opportunities to build relationships through professional organizations, veteran associations or clubs, and student services can increase feelings of inclusivity and improve persistence, provide support in meaningful ways, and assist students balance their academic and social responsibilities (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Lins (2001) theory of social capital draws attention to the importance of shared information, camaraderie, or emotional support created through relationships or ‘social ties”. Lin (2021) shares the importance of understanding that social capital is developed through phases. These include one's position within their social exchanges (where values and hierarchies are derived), relationship building, which increase accessibility to potential benefits, and the utilization of social ties through interpersonal interactions which increase personal and professional opportunities. Educator ties with faculty or staff, social ties with fellow students, and military ties with others who understand shared experience, are particularly important to the veteran population (Barry et al., 2014). These factors all contribute to a greater sense of belonging on campus and increased social and cultural capital. (Lin, 2001).

Recommendations

A student veteran's first interaction with an institution should set the tone for their entire experience. A dedicated veterans office that offers private orientation sessions is essential to creating a welcoming environment where student veterans feel valued and supported. A supportive structure in a veteran's office aligns with the "Empathy" aspect of the M.O.R.E. model, which stresses the importance of understanding veterans' specific challenges. Establishing a veterans office allows institutions to foster communication with student veterans, ensuring they receive the guidance they need from the start. Moreover, connecting them to a peer-mentorship program or student veteran organizations, such as the Student Veterans of America (SVA) chapter, can help maintain a sense of community and support throughout their academic journey. These resources will enhance the integration process, helping veterans adjust to college life's academic and social aspects (McAfee & Wojtiuk, 2024).

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From Service to Civilian: Charting a New Path to Success Beyond the Uniform

Yolanda Loften Sims, Tammarra Letbetter, and Tremaine Leslie

Abstract

Transitioning from military to civilian life profoundly impacts veterans' well-being, affecting their sense of purpose, financial stability, community connection, and prospects in education and work. This article explores their unseen challenges, emphasizing the need for a compassionate and comprehensive support network that addresses their interwoven needs. Veterans frequently struggle to translate their specialized military skills into civilian careers, leading to feelings of being undervalued and financial strain. Navigating unfamiliar educational systems and accessing earned benefits also present significant hurdles. Beyond these tangible obstacles, it is also important to recognize and address the invisible wounds that some service members face, such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and depression, as supporting their mental health is essential for a successful reintegration. Advocating for a more mindful approach to veteran reintegration, which deeply respects their service and prioritizes their lasting well-being, is a priority. It calls for recognizing the individual behind the uniform and ensuring holistic support is available to help them thrive in their post-military lives.

Keywords: veterans, civilian, support, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), education

Introduction

Transitioning from military service to civilian life is a complex and multifaceted journey. After dedicating years to serving their country, veterans often encounter significant challenges as they navigate this profound change (Morris, 2025). This article will explore veterans' unique obstacles, highlight key strategies for success, and promote a holistic support system that addresses their diverse needs. The shift from a structured military environment to civilian life often involves navigating complex systems and adapting to new social norms. Educators, counselors, and the wider community are crucial in facilitating a smooth and successful transition, ensuring veterans survive and thrive in their new paths.

Challenges Faced by Transitioning Military Members

A clear and in-depth understanding of the intricate and interconnected challenges military members face as they transition to civilian life is crucial in providing meaningful support (Bartee & Dooley, 2019). This transition often precipitates a series of obstacles that can profoundly impact their ability to reintegrate successfully (Clemens & Milsom, 2008). Veterans encounter various difficulties, including vocational hurdles, educational barriers, financial instability, psychological and emotional struggles, social and community integration challenges, and healthcare problems (Hunter-Johnson et al.; Morris, 2025; Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). Acknowledging the complexity and interconnectedness of these challenges helps develop more mindful and intentional strategies to facilitate a smoother and more successful transition to civilian life.

Employment Challenges

Clemens and Milsom (2008) attested that veterans frequently encounter significant vocational obstacles when transitioning to civilian life. A primary challenge lies in translating specialized military skills into marketable civilian occupations, leading to underemployment or unemployment, which fuels financial instability and diminishes self-efficacy (Clemens & Milsom, 2008). The disconnect between military occupational specialties and civilian job requirements necessitates targeted vocational enhancement programs, a process further complicated by the prevalence of mental health conditions like PTSD (Elliot et al., 2011). The U.S. Department of Labor's Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS, 2022) has acknowledged veterans' difficulties transitioning to civilian employment. In its Fiscal Year 2022 Annual Report to Congress, VETS highlighted the importance of programs designed to address the employment, training, and job security needs of over 200,000 military service members transitioning to civilian life each year (VETS, 2022). These programs aim to support translating military skills to civilian job qualifications and provide career development resources (Bartee & Dooley, 2019). This issue is not merely about finding a job; it is about finding meaningful employment that utilizes their unique skills and experiences, fostering a sense of purpose and value in their post-service lives.

Educational Barriers

Educational barriers pose another considerable hurdle for transitioning veterans. Veterans often encounter significant challenges when adjusting to the diverse teaching methods, expectations, and academic standards in civilian educational institutions. Veterans Affairs (2023a) noted that veterans often struggle to navigate unfamiliar civilian academic systems and grapple with complex administrative processes related to educational benefits. Having come from highly structured environments that emphasize discipline, direct instruction, and mission-focused learning, veterans may find the less formal, discussion-based, and self-directed nature of civilian classrooms unfamiliar and, at times, overwhelming (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). This shift can lead to frustration, self-doubt, and disconnection from their peers. Therefore, providing targeted support such as veteran-specific academic advising, tutoring services, mentoring programs, and workshops on navigating academic culture and educational benefits is critical (NASPA, 2023). Ackerman et al. (2009) added that these resources bridge the gap between military and civilian educational environments while acknowledging veterans' unique strengths, fostering their confidence, and promoting their long-term academic and professional success. Higher education can be a powerful tool for veterans, helping them learn new skills and find good jobs. By supporting them in these ways, we ensure their military service leads to a successful and meaningful civilian life.

Financial Uncertainties

Financial instability further exacerbates the difficulties. Veterans often experience reduced income and loss of military benefits, which creates a struggle to manage civilian budgets and navigate complex benefits systems (Morris, 2025). This dynamic fosters an uncertain financial landscape, where veterans find it hard to maintain economic stability and security, leading to increased stress and anxiety, which further affects their ability to successfully reintegrate into civilian life (Bartee & Dooley, 2019). Financial planning and budgeting workshops, along with clear and accessible information regarding benefits, are crucial for addressing these challenges.

Psychological and Emotional Barriers

Profound psychological and emotional barriers underpin the challenges veterans face. Among transitioning service members, the shift from military to civilian life may disrupt one's sense of identity and purpose, potentially contributing to psychological distress such as anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress; however, this is not the experience of all veterans (Clemens & Milsom, 2008; Demers, 2010; Elliott et al., 2011). For some veterans, comorbid conditions such as substance use and chronic pain can intensify the difficulties associated with reintegration. In these cases, targeted interventions and sustained culturally competent mental health support are essential for rebuilding identity, fostering purpose-driven engagement, and promoting successful reintegration (SAMHSA, 2014). Additionally, the stigma associated with mental health issues within military culture can also prevent veterans from seeking the help they need, further intensifying these challenges.

Social and Community Integration

The loss of military camaraderie frequently hinders social and community reintegration. Bartee and Dooley (2019) concurred that the unique sense of belonging and support within the military is often difficult to replicate in civilian life, leading to isolation and alienation. Demers (2010) added that veterans usually struggle to connect with civilian peers who may not understand their experiences or the challenges of reintegration. This lack of understanding can result in feelings of disconnection and contribute to emotional isolation. Thus, building strong social networks and fostering community engagement is crucial for combating these feelings and promoting a sense of belonging in their post-service lives (Demers, 2010).

Healthcare Access

Accessing and utilizing healthcare services within the complex Veterans Health Administration (VHA) system can pose challenges for veterans (Military OneSource, 2023). Delays in care are common and often exacerbated by mental health stigma and a lack of awareness about available resources (VA Office of Inspector General, 2020). Navigating the intricacies of the VHA can be overwhelming, leading to frustration and discouragement. Ensuring timely access to quality healthcare, including mental health services, is essential for supporting veterans' well-being and reintegration into civilian life.

Fortunately, veterans have access to vital resources such as Veteran Service Officers (VSOs) and trained advocates who assist in navigating VA benefits, including healthcare services (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, n.d.). Organizations like Disabled American Veterans (DAV), Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), and the American Legion offer free support through their VSOs (Disabled American Veterans, n.d.; Veterans Foreign Affairs, n.d.; The American Legion, n.d.). These advocates help veterans file paperwork, schedule appointments, and appeal benefit decisions, making the process less daunting and more manageable.

A key element in ensuring continuity of care is facilitating veterans' access to their military medical records and empowering them to take control of their health. The VA Office of Inspector General (2020) noted that many veterans struggle to access care and understand their benefits. Disruptions in continuity of care can negatively affect reintegration and lead to unfavorable outcomes for veterans and their families. Thus, removing barriers that hinder continuity of care is critical as veterans transition into civilian life (Veterans Affairs, 2023b).

Mentorship, Support, and the Veteran's Path to Reintegration

The challenges veterans face when transitioning back into civilian life often stem from a lack of structured support, leaving veterans feeling disoriented and disconnected (Vacchi, 2012). Without proper guidance, navigating complex systems and unfamiliar environments can become overwhelming, resulting in untapped potential and increased vulnerability (Clemens & Milsom, 2008). Implementing comprehensive mentorship programs and robust support networks is essential to foster resilience and empower veterans. These initiatives provide direction and encouragement, build meaningful connections that address the root causes of isolation, and support a successful reintegration process (Clemens & Milsom, 2008).

The absence of support places an even greater burden on veterans, forcing them to navigate numerous obstacles on their own. Many struggle to translate their military experience into civilian employment opportunities (U.S. Department of Labor, 2022), understand and access their earned benefits (Veterans Affairs, 2023a; Veterans Affairs, 2023b), secure adequate healthcare (VA Office of Inspector General, 2020), and cope with the lasting psychological impacts of their service (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). Without intentional support systems, these challenges can compound or hinder reintegration efforts and overall well-being. Navigating the VA system can be overwhelming for many veterans due to a lack of support, leading to frustration (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, n.d.). Mentorship becomes a vital lifeline in this context, bridging cultural divides and providing the guidance needed for successful reintegration into civilian life. It ensures veterans receive the support necessary to navigate these complexities and honor their sacrifices.

Higher Education's Pathway to Veteran Career Success

The journey from military service to civilian life is more than a career shift; it represents a profound cultural and personal transformation. Vacchi (2012) emphasized that the transition necessitates an intentional and compassionate approach that acknowledges veterans' unique challenges and actively nurtures their growth and reintegration. Higher education emerges as a powerful bridge, offering veterans a space to reimagine their identities and repurpose their military experience into meaningful, purpose-driven careers (Hunter-Johnson et al., 2020). Rumann and Hamrick (2010) highlighted that research continues to affirm the importance of educational pathways tailored to support the lived experiences of veterans. For example, female student veterans thrive when supported by peer networks and targeted academic resources such as writing assistance (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). These tailored initiatives serve a higher purpose than merely preparing veterans for the workforce; they provide an opportunity to rebuild a sense of self, strengthen confidence, and honor the value of their service through learning and meaningful connections (Bartee & Dooley, 2019).

Cate (2014) attested that robust transition support, combined with accessible higher education opportunities, empowers veterans to thrive in civilian spaces. This holistic model addresses the practical aspects of skill translation and career readiness, bolstering healing and cultural adaptation, two essential components of a tremendously successful reintegration (Bartee & Dooley, 2019; Vacchi, 2012). Higher education institutions play a critical role in aiding veterans to transition into civilian employment by providing them with credentials and skills that meet employer standards

(U.S. Department of Labor, 2022). Veterans who enroll in higher education programs gain the opportunity to bridge this gap through the acquisition of industry-specific knowledge and certifications that validate their competencies within civilian contexts (Bartee & Dooley, 2019; U.S. Department of Labor, 2022).

According to the U.S. Department of Labor Employment Workshop, educational institutions often provide customized support services, including career counseling and skills translation workshops, which help veterans effectively articulate their military experience during job searches (U.S. Department of Labor, 2022). Through its intricate dual approach, the system enhances veterans' job prospects while simultaneously building their self-assurance as they enter unfamiliar work environments. Transforming military expertise into civilian-recognized qualifications requires higher education as an essential empowerment tool for veterans (Ackerman et al., 2009).

Understanding Service Types and Diverse Needs

Veterans come from diverse backgrounds, encompassing individuals from Active Duty, National Guard, and Reserve components, each with unique experiences and support needs (Bartee & Dooley, 2019). For those members of the National Guard and Reserve, balancing civilian life and responsibilities such as employment, family, and education with ongoing military obligations can create additional challenges in pursuing higher education (Cate, 2014). This preparation should begin well before leaving service, with veterans taking advantage of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) workshops and navigating their education benefits (Veterans Affairs, 2023a).

Nurturing Well-being for Academic Success

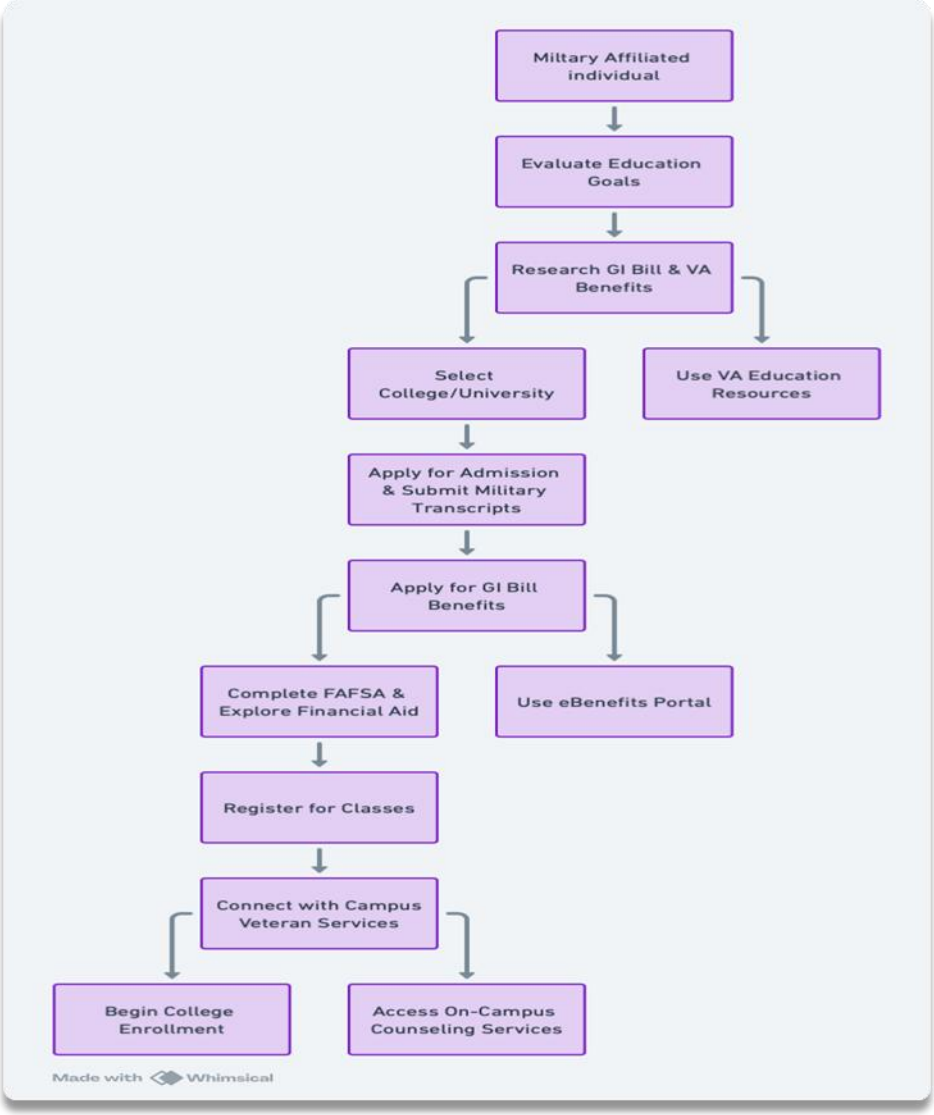
The rigors and demands of military service, including exposure to combat, life-threatening situations, operational stress, long deployments, and frequent relocations, can profoundly impact veterans' mental health and cognitive functioning (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008; Ackerman et al., 2009). Many veterans are at heightened risk for psychological conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety disorders, and cognitive impairments related to traumatic brain injury (TBI), all of which can affect memory, concentration, emotional regulation, and overall psychological well-being (National Center for PTSD, 2021). These mental health and neurocognitive challenges create significant barriers to successful reintegration into civilian life, complicating efforts to pursue higher education, sustain employment, and build healthy interpersonal relationships (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). Addressing these concerns is essential for supporting veterans' long-term well-being, academic success, and social adjustment. Therefore, integrating mental health support into higher education experiences acknowledges the holistic needs of student veterans while fostering a supportive and nurturing environment (Bartee & Dooley, 2019; Morris, 2025).

Conclusion

The complex transition from military to civilian life demands a comprehensive support system that addresses cultural, vocational, and psychological obstacles (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). Mentorship and tailored education are crucial for bridging cultural gaps and providing career skills (U.S. Department of Labor, 2022). Veterans must also have access to benefits information (Veterans Affairs, 2023a; Veterans Affairs, 2023b) and holistic support, including mental health services and community integration, particularly given healthcare challenges (VA Office of Inspector General,

2020). By prioritizing mentorship, education, benefits awareness, and holistic well-being, we empower veterans to build fulfilling post-service lives.

Figure 1
Educational Pathway Flowchart



Note. Military-affiliated individual college enrollment process. Adapted from U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. (n.d.-b). *VA education benefits for service members and veterans*. https://benefits.va.gov/gibill/

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Supporting Educators to Mentor Learners: A New Diffusion Mentoring Model

Richard J. Silvia, Jennifer L. Prisco, and Kathy Peno

Abstract

Pharmacy education is undergoing a major transition from competency-based assessment to evaluation based on entrustable professional activities (EPAs). To support this shift, a Diffusion Mentoring Model was developed to mentor full-time and adjunct faculty in adopting EPA-based assessment methods. Grounded in the Dreyfus Model of Adult Skill Acquisition, the Purposeful Ongoing Mentoring Model-Revised, and the Model of Competency and Entrustability in Complex Environments, the model uses a layered mentoring structure to scale faculty development effectively. Through general information sharing, peer discussion, and individualized support, the model fosters educator growth and reflective practice. It offers a practical, research-informed framework for navigating accreditation changes and has potential applications beyond pharmacy education in clinical teaching environments.

Key Words: Mentoring, Professional Development, entrustability, assessment

Background

A key concern for pharmacy educators is implementing a major educational transition from competency-based assessment to evaluation based on levels of entrustment of observable entrustable professional activities (EPAs). There is a gap in the literature on how to effectively mentor both full-time and adjunct faculty through this transition to a new evaluation approach while also being able to support and develop learners. This paper provides a mentoring model to support educators with the transition as they mentor learners using a new evaluation method.

Changes within Pharmacy Education: Creating the Need for Mentoring

Colleges and Schools of Pharmacy need to ensure pharmacy students are practice-ready, competent learners by the time they graduate from a Doctor of Pharmacy (PharmD) program and become licensed pharmacists. Over the past 15 years, there has been a substantial transition in the discussions on how to develop practice-ready graduates. Compared to 2010, when pharmacy education was primarily competency-based, the new curriculum standards being implemented in 2025 by the Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE, 2025) introduce educational outcomes that include entrustment levels for observable tasks that pharmacy students must perform independently on their first day as licensed pharmacists. This shift in assessment requires support for both educators and learners to ensure a successful transition. As pharmacy educators transition to meet the 2025 ACPE Standards, there are global considerations related to implementing EPAs within clinical rotations required in pharmacy education:

- EPA domains do not provide rotation-specific competency attainment within the required rotations (Medina et al., 2023).
- Using experiential pass/fail grading schemes is more compatible with EPAs, and historically, programs have used letter/numeric grading schemes (Medina et al., 2023).
- There is an educational learning curve to shift from EO-based assessment (e.g. knowledge, skill, and attitude competencies) to evaluation now based on observable tasks a learner would be entrusted to do (e.g. integrate attained competencies into practice activities) (Medina et al., 2023).
- Educators need to be oriented to "the specific learning expectations for the experience outlined in the syllabus, and effective performance evaluation techniques before accepting students" (ACPE, 2025).

There are also a number of clinical rotation considerations programs must be mindful of during this transition:

- Grading consistency can be a challenge (McDowell et al., 2024; Moon et al., 2022).
- How to define and document expectations and progression attainment within and across practice settings for preceptors and students has been identified as an area for concern (Moon et al., 2022).
- Educators need additional time to explain EPAs to their students (McDowell et al., 2024; Rivkin et al., 2020).
- There is a lack of preceptor knowledge about EPAs and a need for preceptor development with implementation (Rivkin et al., 2020).
- Programs have reported concerns about how EPAs will be used in summative evaluation decisions (Rivkin et al., 2020).

To provide further context, the five-point entrustability scale utilized in evaluating the EPAs for pharmacy practitioners can be found in the 2016 publication by Haines et al. cited in our references. All of these considerations will require professional development and mentoring support to ensure proper implementation.

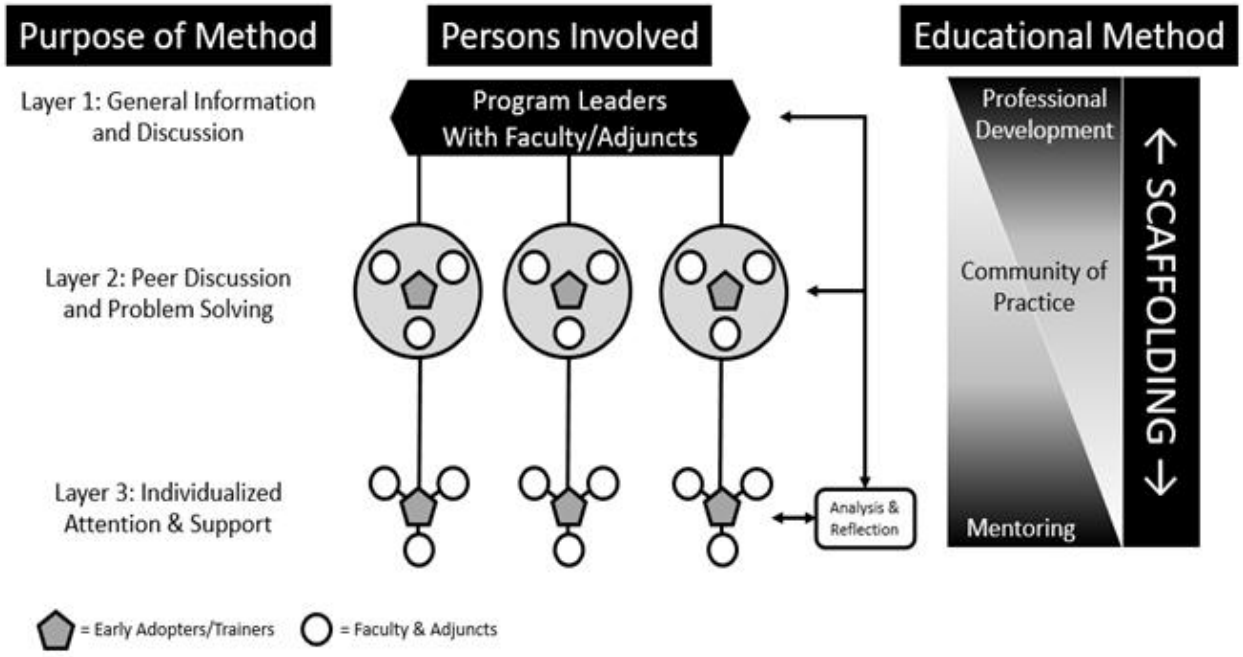
Development of the Diffusion Mentoring Model

Our pharmacy program charged a task force with developing new clinical assessment tools to evaluate PharmD students on the EPAs during clinical rotations. With the new assessment methods being implemented soon, over fifty full-time faculty and hundreds of adjunct faculty will need training and mentoring on how to employ them appropriately and effectively in a short timeframe by a small number of task force members. As this would require each member to mentor over 100 persons each, an alternative mentoring plan was needed; the Diffusion Mentoring Model. This model uses the task force members as program leaders (PLs) to amplify their efforts in a layered model where each layer serves as a mentor to the layer below it, allowing the "diffusion" of mentoring down the model from the small group members to the larger group receiving the mentoring. This diffusion takes place in a faster timeframe than one-to-one mentoring would allow. It incorporates components of both professional development and mentoring within the layers to increase preceptor utility in utilizing the assessment, an additional need for the EPA assessment program that was implemented. A scaffolding approach (Vygotsky, 1978) is utilized

where the PLs model, coach, and provide feedback to the first layer of mentors who then scaffold their knowledge to the subsequent layer of preceptors. All preceptors can then utilize these mentoring skills with their students and employ scaffolding within their clinical rotations.

The model is comprised of three basic levels, each with a specific purpose within the model, involving different groups as the mentors and the mentees, and employing a different general educational method. Each of these levels is provided in Figure 1 and described below.

Figure 1 *Diffusion Mentoring Model*



Layer 1: General Information and Discussion

The main focus of the first layer is general professional development (PD) of all preceptors by the PLs and the initial development of the "early adopters" (EAs). The goal of the PD is to introduce the EPA-based assessment tool to all preceptors using traditional didactic methods, including large group informational meetings and asynchronous recordings. This provides the large number of participants with the basic information on the assessment tool including the entrustability scale and the EPAs to be assessed.

Additionally, a group of 5-10 full-time faculty are recruited to serve as EAs within the model. These faculty participate in the PD component with PLs to develop their knowledge and comfort with the new assessment tool, as well as their individual mentoring skills. While all preceptors complete the PD components, EAs are preparing to serve as mentors to their peers in the next two layers of the model.

Layer 2: Peer Discussion and Problem Solving

Once the EAs are trained in both the core knowledge of the EPA assessment tool and mentoring techniques, they move into the second layer of the model, developing their own communities of practice (CoPs) with their peer preceptors (Wenger, 1998). Each EA is assigned a group of preceptors with the same practice setting as their own (ambulatory care, inpatient, community, and institutional). Therefore, all members in each EAs' CoP have similar practice backgrounds and concerns with implementing the new assessment tool. For example, if CoP members share the same problem evaluating a particular EPA due to practice site limitations, the EA utilizes group mentoring techniques to develop a shared solution to that problem to be utilized by all members.

Similarly, all EAs also have a CoP with the PLs to ensure they receive support and mentoring needed within the model. This establishes the scaffolding layers inherent in the model, with the PLs mentoring the EAs who in turn mentor the members of their CoPs. This also develops a "feedback loop" of information to come back to the PLs from the layers below, allowing them to respond to broader concerns across the CoPs.

Layer 3: Individualized Attention and Support

The third and final layer consists of individualized mentoring between the EAs and the preceptors within their CoPs. EAs meet with the preceptors, based upon individual need. Need is determined by the preceptors but also the EAs and PLs. For example, if a preceptor has a persistent unresolved question, or is notably outside of their peers in applying the assessment tool, then individualized mentoring can occur. This reinforces the feedback loop inherent in the model.

Theoretical Foundations

The Diffusion Mentoring Model is grounded in the work of Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1980) on the Model of Adult Skill Acquisition, the Purposeful Ongoing Mentoring Model-Revised (POMM-R) (Peno & Silva Mangiante, 2021) and the Model of Competency and Entrustability in Complex Environments (Silvia & Peno, 2022, 2023). Here we provide a brief overview of each model and the influence of each on the Diffusion Mentoring Model.

The Model of Adult Skill Acquisition (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1980) (hereinafter referred to as the skill model) describes skill development from Novice to Expert in a particular domain; novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient, and expert (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1988). Movement along the skill model occurs through experience and/or instructional guidance. Practitioners at the novice level lack context awareness as they are new to the field. They rely on rules they learned pre-service and are inflexible in their decision making. Practitioners progress to advanced beginner usually after a year as a novice practitioner and begin to see the idiosyncrasies of multiple contexts and notice that rules may not apply as they previously thought. They begin to develop guiding maxims to apply to specific situations they are faced with. For purposes of the Diffusion Mentoring Model, our focus was on practitioners who would be teaching novice and advanced beginner level pharmacy students. It is helpful for pharmacy faculty to understand the characteristics of their

students in the earlier levels of skill development so they may help them move to higher levels over time.

In 2021, Peno & Silva Mangiante published their POMM-Revised model. The POMM-R expands the Dreyfus' model by adding actions used by mentors to develop practitioners to higher levels of practice. Table 1 outlines characteristics of practitioners at each of novice and advanced levels of practice, goals for moving practitioners to the next level and mentor actions used with mentees.

Table 1

Purposeful Ongoing Mentoring Model-R (Peno & Silva Mangiante, 2021)

	Novice	**Advanced Beginner**
Character-istics	*Applies rules learned in training to guide his/her actions without flexibility. *No regard for context.	*Recognizes the context of situations. *Generates guiding maxims to deal with specific situations *Has difficulty sensing what is important and/or handling challenging situations.
Goals:	*To increase awareness of context of situations. Examine rules as applied.	*To increase awareness of the relative importance of different situations.
Mentor Actions (with learner/ mentee)	*Assist the learner in reflecting on current practice. *Model an effective strategy for using a rule in a given context. *Provide feedback on the learner's construction of a new approach.	*Assist learner to reflect on practice as applied in different situations. *Model alternative approaches. *Provide feedback on the learner's construction of practice in a variety of situations.

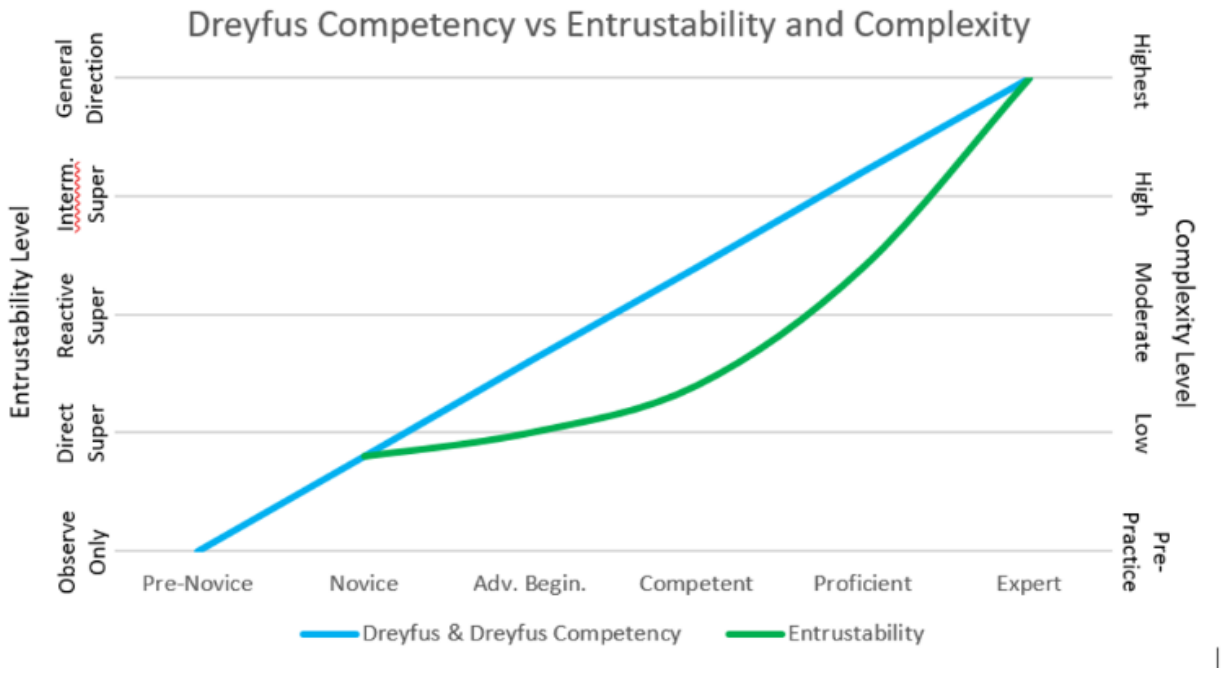
Characteristics section adapted from Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1980, 1988) and Rousse and Dreyfus (2021)

The POMM-R is utilized within the Diffusion Mentoring Model as a framework for mentors to engage with their mentees to support them in goal setting and reflection on practice when using the new assessment tool. For example, a mentor may use case study to encourage the faculty member to consider goals for moving to the next level of skill, scaffold their thinking about what practice might look like at the higher level, and scaffold their growth by demonstrating higher level practice and providing an opportunity for mentee reflection.

The Model of Competency and Entrustability in Complex Environments (Silvia & Peno, 2022, 2023) is utilized to provide the core content of the professional development provided within the Diffusion Mentoring Model to pharmacy faculty. Figure 2 illustrates the relationships between levels of learner practice based upon the Dreyfus model (1980) (we added a pre-novice level for new pharmacy students with no experience), entrustability levels, and environmental complexity levels. The green line shows potential growth and change in the entrustability level assigned to a pharmacy learner over time and as the complexity of practice environments increases, while the blue line indicates a pharmacy learner's growth in competency level over time. This is important for pharmacy faculty to understand as they navigate the new assessment tool. This model is used with pharmacy faculty in a case study format to help them understand the subtleties that exist in environments of differing complexity and the entrustability they afford students at each level of practice. For example, faculty will be asked to consider novice learners in both an ICU and community pharmacy to differentiate the entrustability level appropriately. These different levels of complexity will be explored to help faculty understand their own actions.

Figure 2

Model of Competency and Entrustability in Complex Environments (Silvia & Peno, 2022, 2023)



Implications

The Diffusion Mentoring Model has several key implications for pharmacy education and potentially for other clinical education settings. First, the model allows for scalable faculty development by enabling small groups of EPA-trained faculty to mentor large networks of full-time and adjunct faculty. The model offers a practical solution to the widespread professional

development demands brought about by accreditation changes. Additionally, by providing support for novice educators, grounded in adult learning theory, it offers differentiated support that considers faculty development stages, ensuring mentors can address the needs of both experienced and inexperienced preceptors. The mentoring framework provides a structured way to fulfill ACPE expectations for faculty preparation, performance evaluation, and integration of EPAs, thus promoting institutional compliance. Finally, though developed within pharmacy education, the model has potential adaptability for other health professions transitioning to entrustability-based education, especially in complex, high-stakes clinical environments.

Summary and Conclusion

Pharmacy education is undergoing a paradigm shift with the 2025 ACPE standards that require learners to be assessed based on their performance of observable EPAs. This shift demands a new approach to faculty development, particularly given the large numbers of educators involved and the complexity of clinical practice settings. The Diffusion Mentoring Model was developed to address this need by leveraging a cascading mentoring structure that enables a small core of experts to train a much larger educator population effectively.

The model is theoretically grounded in three frameworks: the Dreyfus Model of Adult Skill Acquisition, which explains how practitioners progress in expertise; the Purposeful Ongoing Mentoring Model-Revised, which outlines mentor actions for supporting skill growth; and the Model of Competency and Entrustability in Complex Environments, which maps the interaction between learner development, supervision levels, and clinical complexity.

Through three progressive layers—general information sharing, peer discussion, and individualized support, the model fosters reflective practice and skill development while accommodating a range of faculty experience levels. As pharmacy education continues to evolve, this mentoring model offers a timely, research-informed solution to support educators in delivering high-quality, consistent, and compliant learner assessments.

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Save the Date—AHEA Conference 2026

Make plans now to join us next year.

The 2026 Adult Higher Education Alliance (AHEA) will be hybrid. Virtual presentations will be held in February, and in-person sessions will be presented in March in Tampa, Florida at the University of South Florida. The call for presentation proposals and details regarding the conference will be sent out early in the fall.

Begin thinking now about how your ideas might add to this discussion. We look forward to seeing you in 2026.