

Do Veterans Belong?:

The Development of Veteran Communities at Traditional Four-Year Institutions

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### Abstract

This presentation focuses on the importance and impact of veteran communities in higher education by applying social identity theory to student-veterans at a traditional four-year institution. Based on a qualitative study of seven student-veterans, our findings indicate that: (1) the existence of a student-veteran community on campus did not solicit any significant impact on veteran or non-veteran students; and (2) the veterans' perceptions of support and belonging coupled with their interactions with members of the community in academic and social environments correlated with their overall perceptions of support and belonging in the overall campus community. Implications include the importance of connecting veterans in traditional student programs with other veterans and non-traditional students and training faculty on how to interact and provide support to student-veterans.

With the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq winding down, an increasing number of veterans are using their Post 9-11 G.I. Bill benefits to fund their post-secondary educations. O'Herrin (2011) indicated that active duty and veteran students represented 4 percent of the total undergraduate population enrolled at colleges and universities in 2007-08. As of 2011, approximately 2.2 million troops and their family members were eligible for educational benefits. Post-secondary institutions will continue to see significant growth in their veteran student populations, and they must ensure their ability to meet the needs of returning soldiers.

### **Needs of Student-Veterans**

Veteran students have very specific needs that are unlike those of traditional undergraduates and transfer students. They are typically older than traditional students (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009). They are more likely to experience physical disabilities, symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and depression as a result of their combat experience (Runman & Hamrick, 2010). DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008) noted educational benefits as one of the main reasons soldiers enlist in military service and described how a majority of veterans pursuing higher education still need additional financial assistance upon enrolling in school. Due to administrative barriers, many veteran students do not receive their educational benefits until after their institution's enrollment deadline has passed, forcing them to pay their tuition, books, and other fees out-of-pocket. Furthermore, many veteran students have difficulties transitioning back into the civilian world and forming relationships with faculty, staff and students who lack combat experience and understanding of the student-veterans' often conservative world views (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009).

Summerlot, Green, and Parker (2009) suggested that a variety of factors, such as the aforementioned lack of understanding, contributed to the perception that veteran students were under-appreciated in higher education. By studying veteran social identity development and by facilitating the development of communities for veterans, a student affairs practitioner or administrator can enhance the overall quality of the institution-student relationship and of the campus as a whole. The institution may also benefit from the support they provide by increased retention and degree-attainment. Beyond these beneficial gains, giving back to the veterans on campus is a way for an administration to thank and respect these veterans for their sacrifices. The target audiences for this research are higher education administrators and student affairs practitioners who are interested in aiding student-veterans and who could make a positive impact on the student experience for these student-veterans.

This paper focuses on the development and influence of a community of veterans on the main campus of Mid-Atlantic University (MAU) and how social identity is applied to and manifested in the development of veteran communities in higher education. We also discuss the importance of faculty and administrative involvement in the efforts to establish these communities.

## **Literature Review**

### **Social Identity Theory**

According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), people based their self-concepts of who they are, what they believe in, and how they relate to others on the group to which they belong. There were three mental processes that individuals used to evaluate themselves and others. In the first process, *social categorization*, individuals identified and

understood other people and their social environment by categorizing them into groups based on similar characteristics (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Individuals then went through the second process, *social identification*, to identify which group they belong to, or their “in-group,” based on the presence of shared characteristics. According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), the third process, *social comparison*, involved understanding the relationship between the individual’s in-group and other groups in the rest of the community, known as “out-groups.” Hardiman and Jackson (1997) noted that the relationships individuals have with these out-groups are often negative when the out-groups are privileged to institutionally supported benefits that the in-groups are not.

**Social identity theory in higher education.** In a study on social identity complexity, Roccas and Brewer (2002) found that college students typically identified with 4 to 5 different in-groups based on race and ethnicity, religion, age, and hometown. Students who identified with multiple majority in-groups exhibited higher tolerances for out-groups than students who identified with fewer majority in-groups (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). Members of minority in-groups did not usually suffer from low self-esteem if they were able to identify with a majority in-group (Roccas, 2001). However, individuals who failed to identify with a majority in-group rated themselves less favorably when compared to members of the out-group (Roccas & Brewer, 2002).

### **Veterans as Students**

In addition to dealing with the reevaluation of their multiple identities, student veterans may also deal with transitional issues of going from soldier in the field to student in the classroom. The military emphasizes group cohesion and devalues individualism, whereas higher education focuses on individuality. In reentering the

civilian world, veterans are forced to redefine their identities (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009). As non-traditional students, veterans may exhibit multiple minority in-group characteristics beyond their veteran status, including age, maturity level, marital status, and physical disabilities. In one study, veteran students identified age and maturity levels as their most discernible differences when compared to other students (Grimes et al., 2011). They did not express interest in connecting with the younger students on campus and established their sense of belonging outside of the university through previous friends and family members. Grimes et al. (2011) stressed that their veteran status was secondary to their non-traditional age when examining their student identities.

Van Dusen's study (2011) of three public Texas institutions supported the theory that veteran students placed little value on social integration within their campuses. Instead, they valued academic work, family, and previously established friendships and sought social fulfillment outside of college. The veterans viewed traditional students as self-centered, immature, and unappreciative (Van Dusen, 2011). Despite the interviewer comments, Van Dusen (2011) determined that the overall campus climate was the only statistically significant predictor of a student-veteran's intent to persist and a supportive campus community towards veterans was necessary.

A qualitative study by DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008) indicated that student-veterans valued a connection with their peers, but similar to the results of other studies, the authors found that differences in maturity levels acted as a barrier in forming those relationships. Several veteran students were reluctant to express their opinions in classes with liberal-minded professors, while other veteran students perceived a lack of sympathy and sensitivity from other students towards their wartime experiences

(DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008).

Baechtold and De Sawal (2009) noted that military basic training forced each service member into a pre-assigned uniform identity only valued within the military community. Upon being released into the civilian world, service members were forced to reevaluate their gender and occupational identities. Upon disengaging with the military command and entering the often laissez-faire environment of higher education, veterans often found themselves needing to renegotiate their social identities.

Since veteran students typically relied on previously established relationships outside of their campus to fulfill their social needs, they rarely found an incentive to connect with other students (Grimes et al., 2011, Van Dusen, 2011). While some expressed the desire to establish relationships with their peers, their non-traditional student characteristics made it difficult for them to identify with the traditional students within the campus community.

Institutions with a student-veteran population must be mindful of how their policies and programs affect the student-veterans in their transition into higher education. By using the social identity theory and applying them to veteran experiences, colleges and universities can find effective ways to implement support programs for veterans enrolled at their institutions.

### **Institutional Climate**

To understand the difficulties of veteran students transitioning into higher education, it is important to understand how different types of institutional climates affect veterans and what practices and measures can be taken by these institutions to assist the student veterans. Summerlot, Green, & Parker (2009) identified and defined three types

of veteran climates in higher education: supportive, ambivalent, and challenging.

Institutions with a supportive climate often have a strong history of military ties, were often land-grant institutions, are located near a military base, or have a strong ROTC program. Veterans are typically represented among the faculty and staff, and an atmosphere of advocacy exists among the student veteran population. These institutions typically have moderate to robust veteran support programs and policies.

The ambivalent climate describes many commuter campuses with a large population of non-traditional students. Student demographics and pre-college experiences vary greatly, and less emphasis is placed on student affairs, making veterans less likely to receive special attention. Veterans have difficulty reaching out to other veterans due to the minimal number of student affairs services available on campus.

The challenging climate is more liberal in nature and may have a history of anti-military views or a student body that is unfamiliar with the military. Traditional college campuses often exhibit these traits and have a lack of resources and support for military veterans. Without the presence of veteran support within the institution, veterans are less likely to make themselves known, and thus less likely to engage with groups sharing experiences similar to their own.

It is difficult to pinpoint precise veteran needs since they vary depending on the institution's location and policies, the size of its veteran population, and the demographic makeup of its non-veteran student body. Laws requiring colleges and universities to implement veteran-friendly policies varies differ from state to state, and the breadth of veteran support services fluctuates at each institution. The majority of researchers in the literature review focused their studies on one institution or a group of related institutions



in the same area, examined the campus climate and the veteran population in comparison to the non-veteran population, and discussed the impacts that the particular institution had on the veterans' experiences (Ford, Northrup, Wiley, 2009; Lokken et al.; Grimes et al., 2011).

Despite institutional differences, the existing literature base discussing the needs of Afghanistan and Iraq war veterans in higher education shows that many commonalities exist among veterans studying at different institutions. The need for financial, physical and mental health, and academic support services were themes resonant in multiple studies (Brown & Growth, 2011; Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009). However, the importance of veteran awareness among faculty and students, peer relationships, and student veteran organizations varied in each study (Summerlot et al., 2009; Grimes et al., 2011, Van Dusen, 2011).

By focusing on the social identity of student-veterans and understanding the issues they face at other institutions, we recognized important themes that emerged from our research and transferred that knowledge into functional applications and suggestions for institutional practice.

### **Methods**

The Mid-Atlantic University (MAU) is a highly selective, traditional, four-year public institution located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Its distance from military installations and a major urban center, as well as no historical military affiliation, contributes to the smaller number of veteran students enrolled at MAU in comparison to other institutions. The two nearest military bases are located 102 and 111 miles away. In 2010-2011, MAU enrolled 14,039 undergraduate students and 6,525

graduate students. Approximately 500 transfer students enrolled in the university, with a quarter of them being non-traditional and a third of them transferring in from the Community College System. Only a third of MAU students applied for and received some sort of financial aid and the average student came from an upper-middle class socio-economic background. MAU offers Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) programs affiliated with the Army, Navy, and Air Force.

At the time of this study, MAU did not collect data on the veteran status of their incoming freshmen, thus the only institutional method of identifying undergraduate veteran students was through working with the University Registrar to contact recipients of the 9/11 G.I. Bill. As of fall 2011, there were approximately 360-375 students receiving G.I. Bill benefits, which included undergraduate students, graduate and professional students, active duty military members, veterans, and dependents (S. Tolley, personal communication, September 20, 2011). However, the true population size of undergraduate veteran students at MAU was unknown.

MAU consisted of 11 different schools, seven of which enroll undergraduates. All of the undergraduate schools consisted of a predominantly traditional population of students between the ages of 18-24, with the exception of the School of Continuing Education, which consisted of non-traditional and returning students. At the start of this study, MAU did not have a centralized veteran services liaison or office. Individual student veteran support structures existed at the Graduate School of Business and the Law School, but they were restricted to students enrolled in those schools and inaccessible to undergraduate veterans.

**Access**

The newly formed Military Veterans @ MAU, the only known official undergraduate student veteran organization, was originally the primary focus of our study. However, due to the fledgling nature and its small size we had to reach out to undergraduate veterans who had not yet become involved.

Instead, we identified potential interviewees by reviewing the results from an electronic survey sent through registrar's office to students receiving G.I. Bill benefits in Fall 2011. We narrowed the sample down to those who met the criteria of being both an undergraduate and a veteran or active duty student. Due to the limited population size and the generalized nature of this study, there were no criteria based on gender, ethnicity, age, SES or academic major.

**Sample**

The participants of this study consisted of seven undergraduate students, two of which were female and five were male. Their ages ranged from 23 to 33. Of all the participants, only one identified as African American. Four of the students were enrolled in a Bachelors degree program in the School of Continuing Education (SCE), which was created for non-traditional and returning students, who work full-time. The other three were enrolled in undergraduate schools consisting of predominantly traditional-age students in a primarily residential setting. Of this sample, all but one of the students were veterans. The remaining student was classified as active duty. However, for the sake of simplicity in this study, we will still label all participants as "veteran."

**Methodology**

Interviews were chosen as the research instrument because they provided a more appropriate vehicle than focus groups or surveys. Focus groups would not allow for as

much in-depth individual communication as the student veterans deserved or the research topic requires. Surveys would have been an ineffective method because of the uncertainty of MAU's veteran population size and the lack of a way to reach a number of participants that would allow for results to be statistically meaningful. Furthermore, veteran needs are too complicated and nuanced to be clearly reflected in a quantitative survey.

Each interview lasted for approximately half an hour. In these interviews, we asked a predetermined set of questions to learn how the veteran community on campus affected the individual's social identity development (see Appendix A). Only one researcher was present at each interview ensure the interviewee felt comfortable. The interviews were conducted in a private, neutral setting.

In order to maintain confidentiality, each participant was assigned an alias to be used for the duration of the study. The participants were properly informed about the use of the collected data and their rights as participants. All of the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

### **Analysis**

After the interviews were conducted, we individually reviewed each interview transcription and screened them for errors. Next, we each discerned and summarized the recurring themes present throughout multiple transcriptions using Miles and Huberman's (1994) content summary and open coding methods. After performing our individual analyses, we conducted an in-depth meeting with each other, where we compared the themes from our individual analyses, eliminated any uncommon findings, and then divided the remaining common themes into sub-themes to further categorize our findings. These themes and sub-themes included sense of belonging, interactions, life

experience, outward concern, and goals. Next, still using Miles and Huberman's (1994) general analyses strategies, we created a codebook by translating our sub-themes into descriptive and pattern codes. We then associated the codes with specific quotes from our transcripts to count frequency and derive meaning from the related categories. All commonalities were further examined to determine any links between social identity development and community of the undergraduate student-veterans.

**Considerations for enhancing trustworthiness.** The credibility of this research was assured by our use of memo-ing, cross researcher analysis, as well as peer debriefing. Transferability can be accomplished through the voices and stories of the participants in this study, which other researchers can use to help them develop similar studies. All of our research and analysis is documented and traceable. Our research and analysis is accurate and true, as evidenced by transcripts and notes of the interviews.

**Researchers as instruments.** We were led to the topic of veterans in higher education because it was an issue in which we were passionate about and had strong connections. We both came from military families and have first hand experience with the struggles veterans can face.

### **Limitations and Ethical Concerns**

A significant limitation to this study was the relatively small sample size. Results from this study could be useful to the MAU administration, but are not generalizable to other institutions. Because of the small total population of student veterans at MAU, a wide range of perspectives may not be represented in this study. The small veteran population at MAU also presents a potential ethical dilemma; because students are likely to be familiar with other student veterans on campus, the researchers cannot ensure that

any responses will be completely anonymous.

Additional limitations include the variances between the SCE and On-Campus students due to their differences in classroom environment. The SCE students worked full-time while taking classes with other non-traditional students, whereas On-Campus students were immersed full-time in classes with predominantly traditional students. These differences were taken into consideration while examining the results.

Finally, despite the difference in military status, the active duty participant still went through the same bureaucratic channels and followed academic requirements similar to the other SCE students, so the researchers took his interview responses into consideration. However, because the active duty participant's responses may differ from the veterans' responses due to the difference in military status, the researchers excluded feedback that did not coincide with the majority of the participants' experiences in their results.

### **Results**

Below are the results from the interviews conducted with the seven student-veterans at the Mid-Atlantic University (MAU). Before delving into our findings, it is important to note that the direction of the research diverged from our initial expectations. That is to say, while we began our research with the intent to focus on the veteran community at MAU, several other important themes presented themselves through the course of our interviews. It is also imperative to note that we discovered a stark distinction between participants who were enrolled in the School of Continuing Education (SCE) program and participants who were enrolled in On-Campus programs in the College of Arts and Sciences and School of Engineering. The differences between

these two subgroups are explained in detail in the context of each major theme discussed in the following pages.

We found that the participants socially identified based on characteristics shared with others and then labeled themselves based on these shared characteristics. These labels and identifications greatly impacted how they felt they belonged to the overall MAU community. The findings of our study are explained by examining the categorization of the participants' identity and their identity labels and understanding the implications of the participants' identities as both non-traditional and veteran students in social, academic, and administrative contexts.

### **Categorization of Identity and Identity Labels**

In the context of our study, we understood categorization of social identity to mean how the participants associated with others based on similar characteristics and understood identity labels to be the nominal and commonly used terms that best describe these associations. All of our participants noted that they associated, or did not associate, with people based on their age and perceived age differences. The participants also categorized themselves based on their past and current life experiences. These categorizations led the students to label themselves as "non-traditional" students. Additionally, participants associated with others based on their military experiences. The participants' military experiences ranged from deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan to positions as intelligence analysts. Based on their military experiences, the participants unsurprisingly labeled themselves as veterans. All of the student-veterans interviewed came from unique backgrounds and were at different places in their lives. Some had families or were in committed relationships, while others were finding their way through

their transition to higher education on their own. Even though there was significant differentiation between all of their life experiences, they all felt that at least having life experience separated them from the rest of the MAU community. These categories and labels are critical for understanding how the student-veterans interacted with other members of the MAU community and how these interactions directly influenced their sense of belonging at MAU. The student-veterans related their sense of belonging to the MAU community because of their age and their label as a veteran. They understood their connections to the community through their academic environments and social activities.

### **Identity as Non-Traditional Students**

**Age.** Age was by far the most prominent theme across all of the interviews we conducted. Age was an important point of comparison for all of the student- veterans when discussing their experiences at MAU. The student-veterans who were enrolled in On-Campus programs were highly-sensitive to differences in age socially and academically, while SCE students were more likely to note age differences in social contexts than academic ones.

*Age as a social comparison.* Dave, an On-Campus student, described how his older age impacted how he was able to socially relate to other students:

But maybe they just see that I'm older and that weirds them out a little bit. I mean it would probably weird me out a little bit, too, I guess, I mean if I was 18, 19. Trying to go to school and all my friends were 18, 19 and there's this dude that looks older and you know, you're not really sure about him, where'd he come from, he was, again I'm a transfer student, too, so that didn't really help my case with that because like all these kids probably already have their own little cliques going already, you know, from you know, their first year so being a second-year, it's kind of like, these kids already have established friendships and stuff and



established like little cliques and I met a guy the other day and he was talking about, he was in a frat, and he asked me if I wanted to rush and I kind of giggled at him, I was like, no thanks, man, like...and he was like, aw, that's cool. I mean, he was cool about it, and he didn't take offense, but I was like, again, I emphasized like hey, I'm 25, and kind of past that whole, you know, thing, um, never was really interested in it in the first place, and even as a kid, um, so, but he was on, he was like, yeah, yeah I know what you mean, if I was 25 and had a fiancé, you know, I probably wouldn't be wanting to party and hang out with like a bunch of 19 year old dudes, either, you know?

While this interaction with a classmate was not negative or abrasive, it reinforced to Dave that he is different because he was older and that he does not fit in with other students. Similarly, Brian, a student in the SCE program, notes how his age impacts his choice of social activity:

Obviously there is like this, a lot of the social type events, you know, I don't fit into that type of stuff, I'm not only a lot older but a family man, so um yeah. (laughs) I'm not going to go out to a frat party or something like that.

The perceptions of Dave and Brian are an excellent example of the differences between On-Campus and SCE Students. Whereas Dave was left with a feeling of not belonging, Brian, although clearly uncomfortable with the social activities at MAU, continued on to tell us that :

But, um...it's, MAU has just such a broader range of ages of folks that are on campus, so I mean, I don't feel out of place, even wearing my uniform on campus, is not that out of place either because they do have a pretty big, uh, ROTC program.

***Age in an academic environment.*** How the participants felt their age impacted

their ability to fit into the classroom setting can be examined through their interactions with faculty members and fellow students. The importance of age on the sense of belonging in the academic environment is one of the major differences we saw between the student-veterans enrolled in the SCE program and the student-veterans enrolled in On-Campus programs. Because of the nature and structure of the SCE program, the student-veterans we interviewed felt supported by their faculty and did not feel disconnected from their fellow students. Brian succinctly explains:

..in the SCE program, it's typically non-traditional students, you know, like myself, so you know, I don't feel out of place as far as my age goes.

Christian, another SCE student, when asked about his interactions with faculty responded:

But as far as people at MAU, the professors that I've talked to, and then you know shared my background with, they've all been pretty interested to hear what we have to say.

In stark contrast to Brian and Christian's testimony, the student-veterans in On-Campus programs felt the age difference between themselves and their classmates and professors was inescapable in the academic environment. Heather describes how her age made her feel disconnected with faculty members in the classroom:

Um, I think until I got into more classes for my major, they weren't as sure how to deal with me, because I am older, and you know, I just sit with my back against the wall where I can see the door, I have these little quirks I have to follow and they just don't get it.

Dave illustrates how he feels a stronger connection to his faculty member than he

does with the students in his class because they are closer in age:

Even the young professors, who are probably only like five, ten years older than me, um, when they joke about you know like stuff like Fraggie Rock or something like that, something from the 90s and you know, but you kids don't know that, and I'm like, I do!(laughs) I know what you're talking about. Um, and then it's really weird when they're talking about like some of you people, a lot of the kids in that class were like born in the 90s, I was like, holy crap, like I *remember* the Gulf War.

Comparing herself to other students in her classes, Heather told us:

It was kind of frustrating honestly. Because when you're surrounded with 18,19 year olds who have to be told to do their homework and have to be told all right, this needs to be in no later than 5 o'clock , that does not mean 5:01, kind of thing, but you just, you kind of beat your head against the wall because you're like, okay, I got it, don't talk to me like I'm 12.

**Life experiences.** In addition to their age, the past and current life experiences of the student-veterans had an impact on how they related to students they interacted with socially. Life experiences, in this section differentiated from military experiences, impacted the participants in different ways depending on the program in which they were enrolled.

***Life experiences as a social comparison.*** SCE students did not seem to interpret the amount of their life experiences as detrimental to forming any social relationships. Josh, one of the older participants in our study, describes how he has built relationships with people at MAU:

I've been able to create and sustain friendships with quite a few people. I mean, I guess I could name names or whatever, I've made quite a few friends. Some of

my closest friends, in fact, are people with whom I have either met through the MAU community or been in class with and those friendships I've sustained to this day are, I was just talking on the phone with one earlier, so, I have had no problem doing, my experiences have not, have not created any sort of barrier between me or created any difficulties or difficulties maintaining or acquiring or maintaining friendships.

Alternatively, Heather found that her life experiences simultaneously connected her with students in her class and separated her from them:

You almost feel like a big sister sometimes because they'll say, oh, there's this boy, he's been texting me, and I'm like, kid, I'm divorced, you want boy advice, come here, oh I got it! (laughs).

Mark, an On-Campus student-veteran, felt that his life experiences differentiated him to a point where he was uncomfortable:

I mean, there's times when I feel like I'm standing out, but if I avoid like talking about my life experiences I think people don't even realize that I'm you know, that much older than them.

The On-Campus student-veterans were also very perceptive of differences in perceived socioeconomic status (SES) between themselves and other MAU students. There weren't the same distinctions made in the interviews with SCE student-veterans. Heather associating herself with other non-traditional students says:

We're all in this together, shaking our heads, poor little babies, that mommy and daddy pay for everything.

Dave also notes the differences between what he is able to afford and what his classmates are able to afford. After relating a story about discovering a fellow classmate

has a father with expensive box seats to hockey games, Dave explains:

It's just like, man, that kid, this kid he's got a thing with money. And it's just, there's a lot of that at MAU. You know you see those kids driving a Mercedes-Benz and it's like, dude, come on, the girls, they're driving Beemers, you know, polished up and stuff and it's like you don't even know what a carburetor is, like, just stop driving that.

*Life experiences in an academic environment.* For SCE students, the variation in life experiences proved to be a positive contributing factor to their academic environment. Karen detailed how experiential diversity influenced the classroom dynamic:

Um, just the students that I'm in the classroom with, maybe you have a working mother, single, you know, you have the students that are single or in, you know, the ones that are divorced. It's just very diverse, so many different backgrounds that they have. There are some who, I'm laughing, but they get on your nerves sometimes because they do kind of give off that I-do-know-more-than-you but overall, in my classes is more students trying to learn from one another and recognizing that, you know, everyone has something to put input and everyone has a asset in their own way, and even with their professors, um, they do a very good job of creating that type of an environment, as well, so I really appreciate that.

For the On-Campus students there is always a lurking sense of not belonging in the classroom. For Dave, this feeling is exacerbated because he does not live in a dorm or near any other college students:

I always feel like, just kind of like there's eyes on me and stuff and when I make conversation with people in classroom, in the classroom or whatever, I feel like because I don't maybe live in the dorms or you know, live where they live, I don't

have a roommate to kind of help me out, like, um, where I live, I'm the only college student you know, where I live, so it's kind of like, I separated myself not really meaning to, figuring that people were going to be more like, hey, let's go to somewhere besides a place on campus to hang out, you know, I thought that would kind of be a twist.

The student-veterans overwhelmingly noted their age and life experiences as distinguishing them from other members of the MAU community, especially students. Although the disconnect was undeniable, particularly in social environments, the experiences of those interviewed were generally not negative or harmful to the student-veterans. There were also important differences in the outlooks and reactions of the student-veterans based on whether or not they were enrolled in SCE or On-Campus programs.

### **Identity as a Veteran**

Even though being a non-traditional student was an incredibly important identity label for the participants, especially with regards to their age, their identity as a veteran was also crucial to their sense of belonging at MAU.

**Veteran identity as a social comparison.** There are many different facets of our participants' identities as veterans. The first is how the student-veterans perceive how others react to finding out they are a veteran. The student-veterans who are in On-Campus programs were very uncertain and uncomfortable about displaying their veteran identity right away with people they met. While talking about who he tells that he is a veteran, Mark explains:

And then my advisor, but other than that, I usually don't bring it up, because I feel like everybody assumes that the military is one, just like, let's go, kill kill kill!

And they assume that we're all like ultra-conservative, which for the most part they are, but I'm not, and then uh, I just don't want the baggage that goes along with it. Usually people are just like, oh, you know, great, let's shake your hand and be supportive! But I think they also like, draw conclusions about how and why we, uh, think certain things.

Dave, who did not have a particularly positive experience in the military is doing his best not to be pigeon-holed into common misconceptions about veterans:

I don't tell everybody that I was a Marine vet. You know? Unless it's like somebody that I'm starting to get close to...A lot of people like, oh, Marines, Jarheads, they're just all stupid, so that's a lot of motivation for me to just dispel that rumor right there.

Student-veterans in the SCE program didn't display the same feelings of uncertainty about their status as a veteran that the On-Campus student veterans did. This could be because they do not have the same amount of forced social interactions with traditionally-aged students, because they are more certain in their identity as veterans, or perhaps some combination of both.

The second dimension of the participants' identity as veterans is how they felt they related to other veterans at MAU. It is important to remember that just because they identified as veterans, this does not mean that they view themselves as only a veteran. All of the participants had very different experiences and don't necessarily relate to one another based on their military experience. Heather explained:

You know, like, my experiences are vastly different from the Marine guy that I hang out with, like, he thinks I'm utterly insane because I can name all the different kinds of tanks whereas, you know, I have no idea what a bulkhead or a deck or whatever is, you know, it's, so even though we're all veterans and we've all served our country, it's still, I mean even if I met another soldier, it would be

different, you know, it's hard to find somebody that connects and says, oh okay I get what you're talking about.

After trying to reach out to another marine veteran in one of his classes, Dave shared his disappointment:

But like, it just seemed like he just, his attitude toward the whole thing was like, yeah, cool. Yeah, like, stop talking to me. All right! That's the way you want to be. So it's kind of like, it was a, it's a little bit of a bummer to kind of like, oh my god, a Marine vet! Holy cow, we could...talk about I don't know, the way I see it, you know, the one person that you hate more in the world like, this one Marine guy, a fellow Marine, like that dude is so annoying, he's so this, he's so that, like I cannot stand him- you've still got more in common with him than 99% of the people in the world.

For Mark, age difference and marital status played a factor in his interaction with the student-veteran group, Military Veterans @ MAU:

Last night was literally the first time I've gone to a vet meeting. Uh, we exchanged some phone numbers, we networked a little bit, I'll probably go out with those guys this weekend but we'll see, they were all older too. Actually, I was the young- it was funny, because I always feel like I'm the oldest person in class, but I was definitely the youngest vet there last night... I don't have a family, I'm not divorced or married or anything like that, like most of these other people, so uh, there's also like, I know that there's other opportunities for vets like, that had kids and families and stuff, what was it, there's an orientation for like, returning adults or something like that, so, I'm sure that's good for them, in terms for [sic] me, I'm kind of like in that weird limbo, like, too old, too young, kind of thing.

While SCE student-veterans did not experience the same uncertainty, having relationships with other veterans was something that was also important for them.



Christian describes a friendship that he has developed with another veteran in his SCE classes:

Anyways, he's another Marine veteran who, he's up here in the northern area and we actually live very close to each other and you know, we just got to know each other and we've gone out on, uh, me and my girlfriend have gone out on ah, and had dinner with him and his wife, and uh, we get along great and I mean he's probably the person that I've become friends with and probably hung out the most with outside of school. I think obviously it's the veteran connection and the Marine Corps connection for that, but yeah, I mean the, he's probably the main person I've hung out with.

Veteran relationships are important for all of the participants, but it is difficult to determine whether the participants, particularly On-Campus student-veterans, were specifically eager to develop relationships with other veterans or if they were just looking to make a meaningful connection with somebody a similar age who they could relate to.

**Veteran identity in an academic environment.** Participants in the SCE program did not feel like being a veteran singled them out in the classroom environment. It was just another career perspective in their class with other non-traditional students. Even though they felt welcomed and accepted into the classroom by their peers and by their professors, some SCE student-veterans still felt slightly disconnected. Christian explained how his military service set him apart from his classmates:

I mean it's just a different situation that a lot of these people are coming from than what your average people coming right out of high school or even other people in SCE that are just coming from their careers, I mean, coming from the military is, it's just a completely different world than anything most people ever experience... you know, you understand it's a different world.

Josh's response to being asked how he felt he belonged in the classroom environment mirrored the response given by Christian:

I feel pretty comfortable with it. Obviously my experiences in life are different than those, most of those people around me. But, yeah. I don't feel bad about that or negative in any way about the fact, but I feel comfortable in the classroom setting. I feel welcomed. Yeah, I'm just a little different, I had a little different set of information than most of the people with whom I am in class.

There was no real consensus among the three student-veterans in On-Campus programs with regards to their academic experience. Dave rated his advisors as both "good" and "neutral" as far as understanding the academic challenges he faces because of his time in the military, but thought he received better academic support at the community college he attended before he transferred. Mark struggled with his own intellectual conceptions and academic theories in some of his classes:

There's also, I'm less, I thought, the first semester I came here I took a class on anthropology of Iran, and I have a lot of stipulations and (laughs) biases towards, certain countries, and uh, you know, so obviously I took the class for that reason but there were times in class when people were saying things that I felt were you know, just because the textbook says that America doesn't like the Iranian people doesn't mean that it's necessarily so, there was definitely times when it's like, I'm reading something that I feel other people might just be absorbing, where I'm saying, like, this is not the facts, this isn't...this is one person's perspective. So, I was kind of taken aback by the way people would say, like, I can't believe like American policy for the last 60 years has been completely anti-Arab-Islamic, or something like that. Whereas I would say we don't negotiate with terrorists, and you know, it's been a rough 60 years, so in terms of like, classes with that, definitely my military experiences reveal biases that I, you thought I should have been aware of, but I definitely wasn't, so that took a little bit of challenge.

Heather explained how her military experience magnified her feeling of disconnect from other students in her classes:

They're up til four in the morning studying, I don't do that anymore. I'm old. (Laughs) I've done twenty-four hour duties, I've done deployments, I've done it so it's like I'm not going to stay up 'til 2 in the morning studying calculus, like, just, it's not important in the grand scheme of things.

One theme that developed across all of the interviews was that their military training provided them with “discipline” and “focus” that enabled them to successfully handle their academic workload and form positive study habits. Several participants compared their academic goals and achievements before entering the military to their current academic goals and achievements after their military experience. Mark explained his academic differences before and after his military experience:

I'm definitely not going to say that I wasn't like, that I was stupid before I was in the Marine Corps, but I was definitely less focused and I didn't get good grades... I got all A's and B's here until that Iraq class, which I'm just not going to talk about that so, uh, you know, I'm doing better in class.

**Veteran Identity and relationship with the MAU administration.** When asked about how they felt the administration treated them as veterans, all of the participants were very appreciative and understanding of any hassles they encountered. Only two participants faced any actual problems with the MAU administration, but expressly stated that they understood that it wasn't really their fault and that there were problems with bureaucracies and the Veteran Affairs (VA) Department.

When asked about how MAU could improve services, most of the participants responded that they would like a resource- whether a person or an entire center- who they

could connect to directly as veterans and who could help them navigate both the bureaucracies of the University and the VA. As Karen eloquently explains:

So maybe they could find a way to create that community, not necessarily to isolate us, but to help us know you're not the only one here and there are others that maybe you could communicate with and grow from.

Our interviews with the seven student-veterans at Mid-Atlantic University illuminated the struggles they faced relating to members of the MAU community and other veterans in both social and academic contexts. Their identities as non-traditional and veteran students caused the participants to feel like they didn't really relate with other MAU students, but were not dissuaded and were still overall enjoying their experiences at the institutions. These differences were significantly more pronounced for the students enrolled in the On-Campus programs than for the SCE students. Although interesting, our results were not entirely surprising or unexpected.

### **Discussion**

Our findings corresponded with most of the previous research from our literature review. In this section, we will discuss the commonalities between previous studies regarding student-veteran social identity theory and social integration. Then we will discuss how Military Veterans @ MAU plays a role in the student-veteran community within the university. Third, we will analyze our results and assign a campus climate for MAU based on Summerlot, Green, and Parker's (2009) veteran climates in higher education and discuss the implications for policy and practice specific to the MAU community. Finally, we will recommend areas of further assessment within MAU and among all institutions of higher education.

### **Student-Veteran Social Identity Theory and Social Integration**

While individual nuances within their social identities emerged based on their academic history, socio-economic status, branch of service and specific job within the military, all participants generally identified as non-traditional students and student-veterans. As seen in previous studies, our participants compared themselves against other students based firstly on age and maturity level, and secondly on veteran status (Grimes et al., 2011). Considering the traditional student demographic at MAU, it is safe to assume that based on age, maturity level, and veteran status, the student-veterans identified with minority in-groups. Roccas and Brewer (2002) noted that an absence in connection with a majority in-group contributed to a decreased sense of belonging, which is prevalent throughout the On-Campus participants' experiences academically and socially within the classroom and in the overall university community. On the other hand, within the classroom the SCE students identified with the majority in-group of non-traditional students and carried a more positive attitude and perceived sense of belonging in the overall university community.

Van Dusen (2011) found that student-veterans valued academic work and outside relationships over social integration within their campuses. While all participants placed an emphasis on academic goals over social interactions, the responses varied on the importance of social integration within the university community. All of the SCE students had no trouble forming friendships with other veterans and non-traditional students within their classes and seemed content with their overall social integration. Meanwhile, the On-Campus students struggled with connecting to the younger students in their classes, to other veterans in their classes, and with the greater campus

community. Their experiences fit DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell's study (2008), showing that student-veterans valued a connection with their peers, but faced difficulties in establishing relationships based on differences in age and maturity levels. Thus, the On-Campus students actively sought to find other veterans who were similar in age and maturity level outside of the classroom.

### **Student-Veteran Community and Military Veterans @ MAU**

We originally intended to study how the undergraduate student-veteran organization, Military Veterans @ MAU (MV@MAU), impacted the undergraduate student-veteran population and greater MAU community. In its current state, MV@MAU does not have a strong enough presence to make any impact on either community. Heather and Mark were the only participants that had any knowledge of MV@MAU's existence prior to their interviews, and they both indicated that it was too early to tell if MV@MAU would contribute to their experiences at MAU. When given information on MV@MAU, none of the SCE students expressed interest in attending the organization's meetings, citing other priorities and obligations. However, each SCE student noted that if MV@MAU needed their assistance, they would gladly contribute to help the veteran community. All of the On-Campus students indicated interest in further exploring MV@MAU.

**SCE vs. On-Campus student-veterans.** The differences between the SCE and On-Campus students regarding their interest in MV@MAU could be due to a variety of reasons. First, the SCE students had full-time jobs in addition to their classes. Their commitment to their careers, their academics and their outside relationships left little time

for involvement in other activities. Next, the SCE students felt more connected to their classmates due to similarities in age and perspectives of being non-traditional students. With such positive experiences within the classroom community, the SCE students may not have the need to form additional relationships outside of class. Finally, each SCE student indicated that he/she strongly connected with at least one other student-veteran from his/her class. This could indicate that student-veterans value the quality of the veteran relationship over the quantity of veteran relationships.

Conversely, the On-Campus students did not indicate having significant obligations outside of the classroom. They were more acutely aware of their differences when compared to their classmates, and while they indicated that they knew of at least one other student-veteran within their academic program, they were unable to establish a close relationship with another student-veteran. Their inability to relate to the majority in-group within their classroom and their lack of a strong connection with another student-veteran may contribute to their desire to seek out a student-veteran community with MV@MAU.

**Veteran identity vs. other identities.** While all participants indicated the perceived importance of having a student-veteran community, we wonder if what they actually need is to identify with someone sharing similar characteristics. Heather indicates that she interacts with other veterans from her class, but she identifies a younger, non-veteran student who reminds her of her sister as her best friend. Mark describes his first encounter with MV@MAU as being slightly uncomfortable due to differences in age and marital status. While all participants acknowledge the commonalities that veterans share significantly increases the likelihood of establishing a

connection with one another student-veteran, veteran status does not seem to be the sole factor in creating friendships. Instead, additional attributes such as age, marital status, social and academic interests, and jobs within the military play a significant role in how closely veterans connect with each other. For example, the veterans within Karen and Brian's social groups share the similar characteristics of being family-oriented intelligence analysts. Josh indicates that interests in business, leadership, and social drinking tie his group of friends together. Christian and his friend are both Marines with deployment stories. While these factors may more likely intercede with military experience, they are not restricted to the veteran connection.

**Support system for student-veterans.** All participants ideologically favor a stronger student-veteran community at MAU. However, the extent to which they would utilize student-veteran organizations such as MV@MAU may heavily depend on their existing time commitments, their sense of belonging and quality of interactions in other areas of the university, and their ability to identify with individuals in MV@MAU beyond the initial veteran status. While organizations such as MV@MAU may positively contribute to some student-veteran experiences, one should not assume that it impacts all student-veterans. Instead, MAU should explore ways to create positive environments for non-traditional students and student-veterans throughout the university.

### **Veteran Climate at MAU and Implications for Policy and Practice**

Of Summerlot, Green, and Parker's (2009) three veteran climates, MAU most closely resembles the challenging climate. With no centralized veteran office, student-veterans experience difficulties in identifying services available to them and in



connecting with one another. Prior to 2011, MAU did not collect data on the student-veteran population, so it had no way of measuring specific veteran needs. Without veteran support within the institution, student-veterans are less likely to make themselves known, and are thus less likely to engage with groups sharing experiences similar to their own (Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009). Most participants agree the first step to creating a more welcoming environment for student-veterans is through establishing a formal liaison to connect all student-veterans with support services such as MVMAU. If the students could identify a formal veteran liaison, they would be more likely to explore other student-veteran support services within the university.

An interesting observation is the comparison between the On-Campus and SCE academic climates. While the On-Campus academic climate resembles the university's challenging climate – liberal-leaning, traditional, and unfamiliar with student-veteran needs—the SCE academic climate is better described as ambivalent. The SCE students did not receive any special attention for being veterans, but faculty and classmates accepted their past military experience and understood their needs as non-traditional students more readily than the On-Campus students' faculty and classmates.

The university must educate faculty and staff on the growing student-veteran population. Five of the participants, including all of the SCE students, indicated that when the faculty was familiar with the student-veteran population, it contributed to a more positive learning environment. The lack of general knowledge regarding student-veterans may lead to stereotyping from other students and faculty, especially within the On-Campus programs. Heather, Mark and Dave initially received negative feedback from their professors, who were unfamiliar with the participants' academic backgrounds and

military experiences, but once the student-veterans explained their circumstances, the faculty usually became more understanding. However, Mark and Dave still felt that once they revealed their veteran status, students and faculty intrinsically judged them as being more prone to violence, more conservative, and less intelligent than the other students.

Finally, since their non-traditional student status and social identity within the classroom seemed to be a significant indicator of the participants' sense of belonging in the overall campus community, the university should make an effort to connect student-veterans with other non-traditional students within their majors. Non-traditional student status is not a physically identifiable attribute, and being able to identify other non-traditional students in their majors creates the opportunity for student-veterans to connect with other non-traditional students based on similarities in age, life experiences, social interests and other factors that may contribute to positive social identity development.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations for Future Assessment**

There is not enough evidence to show that a veteran community significantly impacts student-veterans' academic and social integration within university. The only indicators we found related to student-veteran integration within any community is from inside the classroom. If student-veterans identified with the majority in-group, specifically in relation to non-traditional student status, then they were less likely to seek a veteran community outside of the classroom. However, if they did not identify with the majority in-group within their classrooms, they were more likely to experience isolation and seek out a veteran community elsewhere. Our research also reveals that student-veterans are more likely to have a positive classroom experience if they perceive that the faculty is familiar with their military experiences and non-traditional student status. Since

most university classes consist of predominantly traditional-age students, the faculty is more likely to be inexperienced in interacting with non-traditional students and student-veterans.

The climate at MAU is changing as we reach the completion of this study. The administration began collecting self-reported data on the veteran status of all incoming students. MAU also hired a person within the registrar's office charged with communicating with all Post 9-11 G.I. Bill recipients. Since these changes were implemented after we collected our data, we do not know the impact they may have on the student-veteran community at MAU. We recommend a follow-up study to measure the effectiveness of these changes. Additionally, we were unable to collect data on the impact of Military Veterans @ MAU (MV@MAU) due to its small size and fledging nature. As the organization garners more recognition and participation, it would be helpful to study its impact on student-veterans in a social and academic context.

As noted in our discussion, many differences exist within student-veteran sub groups, and it is not fair to place generalizations on all student-veterans. Attributes such as branch of service, marital status, combat experience, job description, and age played a significant role in how participants identified themselves and against one another. Research based specifically on the social identity development between student-veteran sub groups can help universities better understand the psychological, social and academic needs of various veteran sub groups.

Finally, there are two things of interest to note about how age impacted how the participants felt they belonged in the social and academic environments at MAU. First, three of our seven participants believed that they were not academically qualified to be at

MAU in comparison to traditional students. Second, there is a distinct age difference between the student-veterans in the SCE programs and those in On-Campus programs. Student-veterans in the SCE program ranged from 30 to 32 years old, while student-veterans in On-Campus programs were either 23 or 25 years old. These sub groups of student-veterans could be at very different places in the process of their identity development, which would account for some of the differences we saw in their responses. This was not a factor we had taken into consideration when developing our research question, so there is not an in-depth analysis of the issue within this paper, but it is surely something that should be explored in future studies.

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## Appendix A

## Interview Questions

**Objective 1:** To find out if veteran students feel like they belong within the overall university community (Social Identity Development).

- 1) What are your reasons for choosing to attend MAU over other colleges and universities?
- 2) How do you feel you fit into the academic/in-classroom environment?
- 3) How do you feel you fit into the MAU community outside of the classroom?
- 4) Tell me about the students you've made friends with since enrolling at MAU.

**Objective 2:** To find out the veteran student's level of satisfaction with MAU veteran support services (Transition).

- 1) Tell me how your military background plays a role in your everyday life.
- 2) How has the MAU faculty and administration helped you transition from life in the military to life at a university?
- 3) What can the University do to improve services to veterans at MAU?

**Objective 3:** To find out how involvement with Military Veterans @ MAU has an impact on a veteran student's college experience.

- 1) Are you involved with the student organization Military Veterans @ MAU?
- 2) How was your college experience different prior to joining Military Veterans @ MAU?
- 3) How has Military Veterans @ MAU impacted your experience at MAU?