Building Bridges: Veterans in Transition

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KATHERINE LI, PHD
Outline

• Dissertation (December, 2011)
  “Gearing up for Student Veterans: A Case Study of the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa”

• STEM Think Tank (March 22 & 23, 2012)
  “Navigating the transition from military to civilian life; challenges and opportunities for pursuing STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) education and careers”

• Updates about UHM
Purpose of the doctoral study

- To explore the preparedness of UHM to support combat veterans as they pursue their higher education.
Trauma

- Trauma is referred to as “an extreme traumatic stress involving direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one’s physical integrity, or witnessing an event that involves death, injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of another person.”

(Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (4th ed.) DSM-IV)
Assumptions

- Being exposed to trauma can be a destabilizing experience; therefore creating a safe environment is key to recovery.
- Posttraumatic growth is possible.
- Strategies used to support school children might be applied to adult learners.
- Availability of support services might reduce violence.
- Providing psychosocial support may affect retention.
Literature Review

- Combat veteran post-deployment issues
  - Transition
  - Post 9/11 GI Bill
- Trauma
  - Resilience
  - Posttraumatic growth
- Transformative learning theory
  - School connectedness
Theoretical Framework

- Positive Psychology
  - Strengths-based vs. medical model of pathology
- Constructivism
  - People organize their experiences into a coherent narrative that shapes their worldview
Methodology

- Qualitative research
  - Case study design
    - Fall 2010 – Spring 2011
    - Semi-structured interviews
    - 8 cases
    - 13 faculty and staff
    - 1 noncombatant student veteran
Research Questions

- In what ways is the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa campus aware of or sensitive to the unique psychosocial needs of combat veterans?
- In what ways do combat veterans feel informed about psychosocial services available on campus?
- In what ways do faculty and staff feel informed about how to address potential mental health issues of combat veterans?
- How do student veterans and faculty interact around these issues?
- How might the campus improve its services for both combat veterans and those serving them (i.e., faculty and staff members)?
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6 Major Themes Emerged

- **Culture Shock** of ‘We’ vs. ‘me’ – Putting on the Uniform
- **Transitioning** from Boots to Slippers – Taking off the Uniform
- **UHM is Military-unfriendly** – Veteran-specific Services Lacking
- **Semper Fidelis** – Never Leave a Comrade Behind
- **Addressing Stigma** – Creating a Safe Haven
- **Apathy to Empathy** – Connecting the Dots
Combat Exposure

- 89% were attacked or ambushed
- 86% know a troop injured or killed
- 65% saw dead or injured American
- 69% saw injured women/children and were unable to help
- 86% received artillery fire
- 93% were shot at with small arms
- 77% fired at the enemy
- 95% saw dead bodies or remains

(Padin-Rivera, 2011)
The PTS Syndrome

- Intrusive thoughts/memories
- Nightmares
- Avoidance/isolation
- Anger/angry outbursts
- Hyper-startle response
- Flashbacks
- Hypervigilance
- Feelings of grief, guilt, & loss...

(Padin-Rivera, Schupp & Buck, 2011)
Returning Veterans Experience

- Significant depression 24%
- Alcohol abuse issues 27%
- Anger issues 43%

(Department of Defense Task Force on Mental Health, 2007)
**Transition(ing)**

- **Involvement**: before any notion of leaving has been raised;
- **Leaving**: from when the idea of leaving is raised as a certainty, to the point of departure;
- **Transition**: beginning with leaving one place and ending when, as Pollock and Van Reken put it, ‘we not only arrive at our destination but make the decision, consciously or unconsciously, to settle in and become part of it’ (1999: 66);
- **Entering**: where the individual has decided to become part of the new community, but is still figuring out what that means;
- **Reinvolvement**: where the individual once again becomes ‘part of the permanent community’ (1999: 62-71).

Veteran Suicide

- Feelings that one does not belong with other people
- Feelings that one is a burden on others or society
- An acquired capability to overcome the fear and pain associated with suicide

- 20% of 30,000 suicides committed in the U.S. per year are veterans
  - 30 attempts per day
  - 18 completed suicides (now up to 22)

(DoD, American Forces Press Service, 2010)
Postcombat Battlemind

- **Heightened** sensory **awareness** of sights, sounds & smells
- **Action-oriented** ways of coping with new experiences
- Identification and closeness with their military unit and comrades who have shared similar experiences
- Regimentation into **highly structured** and efficient routines
- Profoundly realigned ideals, values & identity shaped by war
- Habituation to intensity and extreme emotions of combat life
Impact on Learning

- Inability to focus
- “Vague” subject matter
- Lack of structure
- Subject matter or presentation may arouse anger, irritation (politics, history, social sciences)

- mTBI issues may create short term memory deficits
- Internal chaos
- Hyper-arousal
- Disconnect with other students
- Social isolation
Limitations of the Study

- Access to student veterans
- Challenges with data collection
- Gender diversity in the research sample
- Ethnic diversity in the research sample
- Guardedness on the part of student veterans to share their stories
Recommendations

- Create a safe environment
- Identify existing services and programs on campus and create an umbrella or support network
- Create a one-stop-shop Veteran Resource Center
- Create partnerships with the VA
- Appoint a person to act as a liaison between UHM and VA
- Provide training to faculty and staff on veterans’ issues
- Create a class in multicultural or diversity education
- Develop an interdisciplinary program on Trauma Studies
- Establish programs for military social work and military psychology
- Make volunteering opportunities available for student veterans
Place for Narrative

- Cognitive Processing
  - Writing – ‘scriptotherapy’
  - Narrative – storytelling

- Therapeutic
  - CPT
    - Healing, processing loss

- Academic
  - Transformative learning
    - Meaning-making
**Strengths-based Approach**

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<td>Money</td>
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<td>Teamwork</td>
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Suggestions for Future Research

- The needs of female student veterans
- Issues of dependents of student veterans
- How the university could capitalize on the strengths and skills that the student veterans bring to the campus
- Tracking of student veteran retention
- Ways to facilitate understanding between student veterans and Native Hawaiians to address the tensions that exist as a result of the unique history of Hawai‘i; target Native Hawaiian student veterans’ experiences coming to UHM to explore cultural issues of identity
- Polytrauma – This will be an increasingly urgent issue on college campuses
STEM Think Tank
(March 22&23, 2012)

- Transition
- College
- Employment
Transition

- Establish connection with bases prior to discharge
  - TAP (Transition Assistance Program)
  - Recruit for STEM
- Wounded Warrior Battalion
  - Hank Cashen
  - Rodney Sueoka
    - Aptitude testing (STEM)
- Pacific Vocational Rehabilitation
  - Thomas Walk (assists with independent living)

- Veterans’ Court
  - Lindsey Joesting (State Office of Information Practices)
- TBI support
  - Ho‘ikaika Project
- Suicide Prevention
  - David Brown (Tripler)
  - Training (ASIST, safeTALK, etc.)
College (Access, Retention, Completion)

- Mentorship program/Buddy programs
- Briefings
- Cohort system
- Support with different learning styles/memory issues
- Math tutoring
- College of Engineering
  - Dean Crouch – STEM proposals specifically for veterans
- College of Medicine
  - Larry Burgess, Joining Forces
Employment

• Collaboration with business community
  ○ Hawai‘i Chamber of Commerce
    ▫ President James Tollefson
    ▫ VP Charlie Ota
  ○ Native Hawaiian Veterans
    ▫ President Ray Jardine
  ○ Guam Veterans Outreach Center
    ▫ Frank Crisostomo-Kaaihue

• Think Tank Camp
  ▫ Urban Miyares
Conclusion

- Build on established network
- Collaborate across the UH system in an interdisciplinary way
- Grant writing committee
- Meet regularly with other stakeholders
- Include veterans in all stages
Resources

- After Deployment http://www.afterdeployment.org/
- American Council on Education http://www.acenet.edu/Content/NavigationMenu/ProgramsServices/MilitaryPrograms/serving/index.htm
- At War: Notes from the Front Lines http://atwar.blogs.nytimes.com/
- National Center for PTSD http://www.ptsd.va.gov/
- Real Warriors http://realwarriors.net/
- Student Veterans of America http://www.studentveterans.org/
- U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs http://www.va.gov/
Office of Veterans Support Services (OVSS)

- Csaba Hutoczki, VSOC Counselor – UHM / LCC
  - Phone: (808) 265-2803

- University of Hawaiʻi at Mānoa
  - 2600 Campus Road, QLC 214L
  - Honolulu, HI 96822
  - Phone: (808) 956-2192
  - Email: ovss@hawaii.edu
  - Website: studentaffairs.manoa.hawaii.edu/veterans/