For my doctoral work I explored the preparedness of UHM to support combat veterans as they pursue their higher education.
Research

• Combat veteran post-deployment issues
  – Transition
  – Post 9/11 GI Bill

• Trauma
  – Resilience
  – Posttraumatic growth

• Transformative learning theory
  – School connectedness
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)
Combat Exposure

- 86% received artillery fire
- 93% were shot at with small arms
- 77% fired at the enemy
- 95% saw dead bodies or remains
- 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

(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)
Trauma

• Combat veterans of today’s wars have **higher suicide rate** than at any time in U.S. History
• Military personnel with **multiple tours of duty** in combat are at higher risk for PTSD
• **Many military men and women do not seek professional help**
• Much of the public and even many **mental health professionals are uninformed** of lifelong impact of trauma
• Some trauma victims become perpetrators
• **Divorce rates** and failed relationships are **higher** among people with trauma history
• The **whole person** is affected by traumatic events: Physical, Cognitive, Emotional, Behavioral, Spiritual
• The closer a person is in **proximity** to an event the more severe the response
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 (up to 22 in 2013)
  – 5 of which were seeking mental health services by the VA

(DoD, American Forces Press Service, 2010)
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
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.
Adjusting to school after being in the military

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EiuSDQlY6po
Ten Things You Should Know About Today’s Student Veteran

Alison Lighthall (2012)
Student veterans are a highly diverse group—as diverse as America itself.
• Veterans do not see themselves as victims. Ever.
• They can feel very alone on campus.
• They are often unaware of their own mild traumatic brain injuries.
Helpful Strategies

• Make and share recordings of your classroom lectures.
• Allow note taking on laptops.
• Make sure class videos are captioned.
• Try to use texts that can be obtained electronically (in case they need to be read aloud).
• Post notes ahead of time.
• Give option of a different time and place if they are anxious during the exam.
• There are three things you should never say to a student veteran (but they still hear them every day).
Female veterans suffer deeply, and almost always in silence.
• They often want to go back to the war zone.
• Combat trauma is an injury, not a mental illness.
To succeed, veterans need your understanding, compassion and respect.
• Student veterans are one of America’s greatest untapped human resources.
President Obama’s 8 Keys to Success

• Create a culture of trust and connectedness across the campus community to promote well-being and success for Veterans.

• Ensure consistent and sustained support from campus leadership.

• Implement an early alert system to ensure all Veterans receive academic, career, and financial advice before challenges become overwhelming.

• Coordinate and centralize campus efforts for all Veterans, together with the creation of a designated space (even if limited in size).

• Collaborate with local communities and organizations, including government agencies, to align and coordinate various services for Veterans.

• Use a uniform set of data tools to collect and track information on Veterans, including demographics, retention and degree completion.

• Provide comprehensive professional development for faculty and staff on issues and challenges unique to Veterans.

• Develop systems that ensure sustainability of effective practices for Veterans.

Tips for Respectful Conversation With a Student Veteran

How to welcome veterans to campus:

• Welcome them home.
• Express your appreciation of their service.
• Offer to help with their transition to (or back to) campus.
• Support with patience and listening.
• Understand that the transition home is a process and can take time.

Good ways to start a conversation:

• What was your job and where did you go while in the military? (Remember: while many do, not all veterans serve in Iraq and Afghanistan.)
• How are you and your family doing?
Tips for Respectful Conversation With a Student Veteran (cont.)

Topics to avoid when speaking with a veteran:
- Pressuring a veteran regarding specifics about their service they choose not to share with you.
- Minimizing the challenges a veteran might face.
- Making assumptions about any veteran’s political or foreign policy views.
- Singling out a veteran without prior approval (let them choose who they tell about their distinction as a student veteran).

Inappropriate questions:
- Did you kill anyone?
- Did you see anyone die?
- Are you glad that you’re back?
- Do you have to go back?
- Do you think we are winning over there? Is it all worth it?

Remember ...

• Even when approached respectfully, student veterans might not want to talk about their deployment, which is completely understandable. Reaching out is still important, and you’ll most likely find there are many other things to discuss.

(ULifeline, 2013)
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/]
• DCoE - Defense Centers of Excellence [http://www.dcoe.health.mil/]
• In Their Boots [http://www.intheirboots.com/itb/]
• 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/]
• 10 Things You Should Know About Student Veterans [http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/HE/2012-TA-Lighthall.pdf]