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## Discussion and Implications for Practice: Women Student Veterans and their Sense of Identity, Belonging, and Voice in Writing Courses and through Writing Assignments

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### ABSTRACT

Given the lack of published research on women student veterans as a group separate from men student veterans and the unique needs of women student veterans, individual attention needs to be paid to women student veterans. This qualitative study used feminist critical theory to examine the experiences of women student veterans during their transition process from the military to higher education regarding identity, belonging, and voice in connection with writing courses and writing assignments. Real-time in-depth narrative interviews were conducted with seven current or former women student veterans located across the United States. Analysis of the interviews revealed superordinate themes. These three superordinate themes were 1) military influence: lifestyle transition, identity, and writing; 2) peer connections in writing courses; and 3) writing instructor influence. The findings informed by the superordinate themes included women student veterans sometimes have difficulty transitioning from military writing to academic writing, women student veterans need peer connections in the writing classroom, and writing instructors hold much influence over belonging and voice for women student veterans. These findings led to three recommendations for future practice. The first recommendation was that writing workshops focusing on the differences between military writing and academic writing should be held for women student veterans by individual colleges and universities. The second recommendation was colleges and universities can establish and maintain writing groups for women student veterans in which they write and share narratives and poetry reflective of their military and other life experiences. The third recommendation was writing instructors should be trained on providing women student veterans with individualized attention and supportive feedback.

*Keywords:* women student veterans, writing courses, identity, belonging, voice

The purpose of this study was to contribute to current literature on women student veterans and to consider the role writing courses and assignments played in women student veterans' transition process from the military into higher education. The study's research question was what do women student veterans' experiences with writing assignments within college writing courses throughout their transition process from the military into higher education reveal about identity, belonging, and voice? Feminist critical theory, enabling transformative political action and social change (Gannon & Davies, 2014), was chosen as the theoretical framework for this study. Practitioners of feminist critical theory interpret social life and seek to transform it (Gannon & Davies, 2014). Additionally, these practitioners are committed to practical action for change regarding justice (Canaday, 2003). The tenets of feminist critical theory are: 1) seeking to interpret social life, 2) transforming social life, and 3) basing transformation on both subjectivity and choice (Gannon & Davies, 2014). The first tenet directly applied to this study as the researcher sought to interpret the social life of women student veterans connected with writing assignments in writing courses. The importance of validating the voices of women student veterans in story form led to the selection of narrative inquiry as the methodology. Narrative inquiry is defined as an approach that focuses on stories and the meaning that can be derived from the narrator's organization and connection of elements (Chase, 2011; McGannon & Smith, 2015).

Women student veterans who graduated or were enrolled in a college or university at the time of the study were recruited for participation as a purposeful sample. Seven women student veterans were chosen based upon the researcher's knowledge of their background and their rapport with the researcher. The number of participants was purposefully kept small to give adequate focus to the experiences of these women student veterans (Chase, 2011; Langum & Sullivan, 2018). The researcher sought out study participants based upon specific criteria to meet the needs of the study (Creswell, 2013). The criteria included the following: 1) be a

woman, 2) have previously served in a branch of the United States armed services, and 3) be a former or a current student veteran at a two- or four-year college or university in the United States. Information related to the experiences of study participants was gathered through interviews and field notes in order to capture and describe the potential correlation between writing courses and writing assignments in higher education and the identity, belonging, and voice of these women student veterans during their transition process from the military to higher education.

The narratives recounted by the participants in this study were prompted by interview questions based on invitational rhetoric. Invitational rhetoric is meant to establish an equitable relationship between the rhetor and the audience with the audience being invited to participate in the rhetor's dialogue (Griffin & Foss; Ryan & Natale, 2001). The analysis of the data revealed three superordinate themes and seven subordinate themes. The first superordinate theme was military influence: lifestyle transition, identity, and writing. Three subordinate themes emerged from this superordinate theme: 1) military influence on lifestyle transition, 2) military influence on identity, and 3) military influence on writing. The second superordinate theme was peer connections in writing courses. Two subordinate themes emerged from this superordinate theme: 1) disconnection from writing course peers and 2) comfort with writing course peers. The third superordinate theme was writing instructor influence. Two subordinate themes emerged from this superordinate theme: 1) positive writing instructor influence and 2) negative writing instructor influence.

These themes were analyzed and led to three central findings. The first finding was that women student veterans have difficulty transitioning from military writing to academic writing regarding person, vocabulary, and style. According to Carlos Enriquez, a retired U.S. Naval Chief who is currently serving as the site director for Vincennes University's Military Education Program at the Naval Medical Center San Diego, when it comes to person, military writing is typically written in the third person mainly for

performance evaluations and communication within and across military departments and civilian partnerships (personal communication, October 23, 2020). Vocabulary in military writing is often made up of military-specific acronyms and ranks, explained research study participant Eowyn. Enriquez also pointed out that younger soldiers often find themselves having to flesh out performance evaluations with details they find unnecessary in order to meet the character length requirement. Since these younger soldiers have limited experience, they have to elaborate on what experience they do have to meet this length. Military writing can be qualified as business writing, Enriquez explained; military writing is concise and includes bullet points much of the time.

The second and third findings were that women student veterans need a support system within the writing classroom and in higher education in general and that women student veterans' writing classroom experience was influenced by their writing instructors. As discussed below, these three findings align with the experiences of the study participants and the literature, along with informing suggested practices and their implementation at colleges and universities for better supported women student veterans when writing and in the writing classroom.

### **Classroom Practice**

The first finding indicated that women student veterans sometimes have difficulty transitioning from military writing to academic writing, especially with difference in person (third versus first), vocabulary (military-specific jargon versus academic jargon), and style (blunt versus theoretical). This finding connected directly with subordinate theme military influence on writing and the need for women student veterans to be able to express their voice through writing in higher education.

The three participants who had difficulty transitioning from military writing to academic writing were Rachel, Michelle, and Karen. Rachel found it hard to transition from using the third person in military writing to using the first person in her required narrative academic writing. Michelle had trouble transitioning from using

nonessential vocabulary in military writing to only essential vocabulary in academic writing. Michelle explained that in the military, "I use filler words, instead of using actual words, cause that's all you put in evaluations that you write every year: just a bunch of fluff...just so you can make it like a paragraph and sound good." This led to Michelle struggling with writing in college, as she was initially unaware of the differing vocabulary expectations (jargon and details perceived as only necessary to meet a length requirement in a performance evaluation) between military and academic writing. Michelle pointed out, "But, in college, they don't want that...I didn't do good at all whatsoever." Karen experienced frustration over transitioning from the direct and concise writing style of the military to the theoretical academic writing style of qualitative doctoral studies. She revealed, "I don't know if the military kind of molded me as far as being more blunt and direct in answering things, instead of for a Ph.D." Finding certain aspects of the doctorate-level writing troublesome, Karen discovered that "the philosophical points [were] a little more challenging," and that she had to "really...stretch and go out of my comfort zone to reach and write for qualitative." These difficulties affected the ability of Rachel, Michelle, and Karen to confidently express their voices in academic writing.

The experiences of these participants coincided with the literature regarding student veterans failing to recognize the importance of their professional writing training and experiences in the military, as noted by both Hinton (2014) and Hadlock and Doe (2014). In addition, Hadlock and Doe (2014) explained that despite this failure to view their military professional writing training as important, many student veterans did receive such training in the military. The finding that some women student veterans in this study had difficulty transitioning from military writing to academic writing aligned with feminist critical theory. Based upon the second major tenet of feminist critical theory, the lives of women student veterans can be transformed in a way that eases the difficulties of transitioning from military writing to academic writing (Gannon & Davies, 2012). This also coincided with explanation by Boler (2000) of feminist critical theory's emphasis on actual

change through research efforts. While the first finding addressed women student veterans' difficulty transitioning between military writing and academic writing, the second finding identified their need for peer connections in the writing classroom.

The second finding revealed that women student veterans need peer connections in the writing classroom, which can be facilitated through productive group interactions such as peer reviews. This finding coincided with the superordinate theme of peer connections in writing courses, particularly the subordinate theme of disconnection from writing course peers; additionally, it coincided with women student veterans' sense of belonging in writing courses.

The two participants who experienced disconnection from writing course peers and lacked a sense of belonging in their writing course(s) were Eowyn and Jasmine. Eowyn felt a disconnection from her writing course peers due to an unproductive peer review, in which she received little feedback on her writing. "During peer review" sessions in her writing classes, Eowyn "didn't want to overwhelm whoever I was working with," and "I didn't really get a lot of feedback that was helpful for me." Jasmine experienced a disconnection from her writing course peers when she wrote on a subject she perceived as emotionally deeper than that of her peers; the subjects were revealed in peer review sessions. She explained that she wrote "these...like deeper things" than her peers, who "would be writing about like apple pie." Reading her poetry and other written work out loud in class was uncomfortable for Jasmine, adding to her sense of a lack of belonging. Jasmine stated, "We would have to read our stuff out loud. I would feel embarrassed because I had maybe taken the assignments way too seriously. I didn't feel connected with any of these students." These feelings of disconnection from their writing course peers led Eowyn and Jasmine to sense a lack of belonging.

Moreover, this finding aligned with the literature on reasons for student veterans feeling a disconnection from course peers. According to Wheeler (2012), student veterans' lack of a sense of belonging often stemmed from difficulty

relating to younger peers – particularly two years plus – who lacked military experience. Furthermore, Kato et al. (2016) found that student veterans had trouble cultivating and maintaining relationships with their peers lacking military experience. The finding that women student veterans need to be able to relate to their peers in writing courses is situated alongside feminist critical theory. Aligning with the second major tenet of feminist critical theory, women student veterans' sense of belonging in the writing classroom can be transformed by finding shared experiences and values with their peers based upon a sense of belonging in their writing courses (Gannon & Davies, 2012). The ability for this sense of belonging to be transformed in the writing classroom connects with Benhabib's (1995) description of feminist critical theorists basing necessary change on idealistic principles. Belonging was not only connected to peers in college or university writing courses but also to writing instructors and their influence over belonging and voice.

The third finding suggested that writing instructors held much influence over women student veterans' sense of belonging and voice. This finding connected with the superordinate theme of writing instructor influence, especially when writing instructors were unsupportive of women student veterans through a lack of attention or feedback.

The two participants who felt negative writing instructor influence were Karen and Jasmine. Karen experienced a lack of consensus on the feedback from her dissertation committee, which led her to feel a lack of belonging and a stifling of her voice. Karen was left with "one professor" saying "that is great, move forward," and "another professor would say, no, no, that is not good. Let's do this." This made Karen feel that her voice was being negatively affected during this experience. She explained that "it [sense of voice] was almost squashed or quelled...because I was trying to write a certain way, or I was trying to say what my study findings or my participants were saying in the way I interpreted it," but her dissertation committee members were directing her voice "into what they wanted to say, what they wanted to communicate in the study." Jasmine found some writing

instructors to be inattentive when she asked for help as well as a lack of supportive feedback on her writing assignments. Jasmine said, she had instructors “who were like, oh, okay,” when she asked for help. This was an acknowledgement of her need for help, but it did not go past that. This led to a feeling of not belonging and a need to suppress her authentic voice. Jasmine felt isolated by some of the grade comments she received on her work, poetry in particular. These instructor comments included “deep,” “wow,” and “really?” This led to her questioning the topics of some of her writing assignments. Jasmine shared that “It felt like a lot of the time maybe I should be faking what I’m writing.” This caused Jasmine to feel that she did not belong and a lack of confidence in expressing her authentic voice through writing.

The literature supported this finding by reinforcing the effects writing instructor influence can have over belonging and voice for women student veterans. As explained by Wood (2014), a negative experience in the classroom can promote feelings of being unsafe and unsupported; thus, a positive environment must be modeled by the instructor. Additionally, according to Pellegrino and Hoggan (2015), the relationship between faculty and women student veterans is important to the success of these students so it must be cultivated by the course instructor. This finding of writing instructor influence over belonging and voice coincided with feminist critical theory. The third major tenet of feminist critical theory, subjectivity of transformation, connected with the influence writing instructors can have over women student veterans’ belonging and voice (Gannon & Davies, 2012). The need for women student veterans to have a strong sense of belonging and voice in the writing classroom overlapped with Gannon and Davies’ (2012) explanation of the desire of feminist critical theorists to emancipate groups lacking power and facing oppression. Overall, the literature and the study findings aligned with the important role writing instructors play in providing a sense of belonging and enhancing confidence in expressing voice for women student veterans in writing classrooms.

### **Suggested Practice**

The following three practices are suggested to address the transition from military to academic writing, to create effective peer connections, and to enhance the sense of voice and belonging in women student veterans participating in writing courses.

First, writing workshops for women student veterans initially transitioning from the military into higher education should be facilitated by individual colleges and universities. These writing workshops can address the differences between military writing and academic writing to show women student veterans how to navigate the transition between the two. Helping women student veterans be empowered to successfully transition between the two styles of writing at the onset of their college or university studies links with feminist critical theory’s goal. According to Gannon and Davies (2012), of emancipating groups lacking power and feeling oppression by providing them with the knowledge of writing skills and potentially increased confidence to use those writing skills to take back power and express their voice through the written word.

Second, colleges and universities can establish and maintain writing groups for women student veterans in which they write and share narratives and poetry reflective of their military and other life experiences. Leonhardy (2009) found that student veterans were typically invested in writing narratives about their military experiences. The expressive nature of narratives and poetry can allow women student veterans in college and university writing groups to be invested in the writing process and reap the benefits of sharing the emotions affiliated with their experiences in a safe and supportive peer environment. Nevinski (2013) discovered that veterans producing and sharing expressive writing in a writing group promoted better understanding between peers. Moreover, Sayer et al. (2015) noted how expressive writing, in an online study, benefitted veterans in lessening their levels of anger and distress. Deshpande (2010) found that a writing group focused on poetry held at a veteran center with veteran participants benefitted the participants in emotional control and self-acceptance. The reflective nature of expressive writing and the benefits it brings connect with what Benhabib

(1995) identified as the reflectiveness of feminist critical theory in individuals acting as change agents. Change can occur for individual women student veterans as well as the group in these college and university writing groups. Beyond the subjects and types of writing in these college and university writing groups, women student veterans can benefit from how the writing groups are run and what happens to the writing produced within the groups. Schell and Kleinbart (2014), for example, started their Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group by focusing mainly on the positive aspects of veterans' narratives and keeping copies of writing in the hands of the authors, allowing for a focus on written content. The group ultimately led to the formation of a community of multi-generation veteran writers. The same sort of community was built through the library veterans' writing group established and ran by Hartman and Baumgartner (2011). Sometimes, the writing produced within these veterans' writing groups is grouped together into a collection and published. That is what happened with the writing produced in Springsteen's (2014) chapter of the Warrior Writers Project. The benefits of expressive writing and community building could be carried over into college and university women student veterans' writing groups, with the potential for publication of writing produced within the groups.

Third, writing instructors need to be trained on providing women student veterans with individualized attention and supportive feedback. By aiming to be agents of change for women student veterans in their writing courses, writing instructors would need to align themselves with the feminist critical theory by relying upon the idealistic principle of helping women student veterans to necessitate transformative change through individualized attention and supportive feedback (Benhabib, 1995).

### **Implementation**

These three suggested practices can be implemented by colleges and universities to better support women student veterans with and through writing. In terms of implementing writing workshops, writing instructors can partner with the college or university writing center to learn the benefits of military writing and help student veterans see the connections between military

writing and academic writing, which can be achieved through the institutions veteran center staff (Hadlock & Doe, 2014). In addition, writing center tutors can be trained to work specifically with women student veterans to help develop and run the writing workshops. This will introduce women student veterans to both the writing center and its tutors, hopefully encouraging them to utilize this campus resource when future help is needed on writing assignments. Hinton (2014) identified a partnership between writing instructors and college or university writing centers as a means to provide student veterans with increased feedback and support on writing assignments, coupled with having writing center tutors specially trained to work with student veterans.

Enabling women student veterans to transition more easily between military writing and academic writing can help them affirm their identity as college or university students during a period of both lifestyle and identity transition. Attending a writing workshop can promote belonging for women student veterans working alongside their peers in an environment of acceptance and support from college or university writing instructors and tutors. These writing workshops can, furthermore, provide a safe space for women student veterans to begin expressing their voice in academic writing. The promotion and support of identity, belonging, and voice can be enhanced through college or university women student veteran writing groups.

The college and university writing groups for women student veterans can involve participants, solely women student veterans, in reading their writing (focused upon their experiences as women and former members of the military) aloud during group meetings. Colleges and universities can establish partnerships with writing instructors, veteran centers, and writing centers to set up and maintain these women student veteran writing groups. Writing instructors and veteran center staff can serve as facilitators for these writing groups, with the goal being for the groups to be self-run by the group members. Writing centers can provide support for writing improvement as group members see fit. The writing groups can be housed within the veteran center at the college or

university. Schell and Kleinbart (2014) stated that within a veteran writing group that is established and led, participants felt safe to express their voice with their veteran peers. If deemed appropriate, the writing produced by college and university women student veteran writing groups can be exhibited and published, as evidenced with the Warrior Writers Project that Springsteen (2014) established.

Identity can be acknowledged and supported in college and university writing groups for women student veterans as they express their military experiences through narrative and poetry writing. A sense of belonging can be established through the reading aloud of written works within a group of peers at their college or university. Voice can be safely expressed and heard within the supportive environment of these writing groups. While writing groups specifically for women student veterans can help with identity, belonging, and voice, this can be further enhanced through trained writing instructors.

Colleges and universities can offer such training as professional development for their writing instructors. One component of the training can be on identification of the assets that women student veterans bring with them, as individuals and as a group, from the military into higher education. Hart and Thompson (2016) suggested asset-based professional development for writing instructors teaching veteran-specific writing courses; however, such professional development can be made available to all writing instructors who may have women student veterans in their writing classes. Focusing on women student veterans' assets, which were brought from the military into higher education, can inform writing instructor individualized attention and supportive feedback to ensure positive writing instructor influence. These assets include the ability to follow through with an assigned task, a global understanding of the world, a level of maturity, and a sense of personal growth (Blaauw-Hara, 2016; Gregg et al., 2016; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014).

Another component of the writing instructor training can be on navigating and supporting the individual needs of women student veterans, including diagnosed and undiagnosed disabilities. Morrow and Hart (2014) identified the

need for writing instructors to revise their writing courses to better align with the needs of individual student veterans. These needs can involve clear feedback on writing assignments that include grammatical, mechanical, formatting, and citation corrections; detailed and applicable examples; and continuous repetition of corrections and examples within writing assignments and across differing writing assignments. In order for women student veterans to more easily understand this feedback, instructors can model their feedback after the business writing style of instructions given by military supervisors to their subordinates, examples of which can be found in military communication writing manuals (C. Enriquez, personal communication, October 23, 2020). Wood (2014) emphasized that writing instructors need to be conscious of students' diagnosed and undiagnosed disabilities, such as TBI and PTSD, and their effects on student veterans' oral and written communication abilities. Tailoring such individualized attention and supportive feedback to be specific to each woman student veteran would allow instructors to better support this student population.

By providing women student veterans with individualized attention and supportive feedback, writing instructors can help foster a sense of belonging in their writing courses and create a safe space for voice. This can help build rapport between writing instructors and women student veterans in their courses, allowing for women student veterans to feel accepted and supported.

## **Conclusion**

The results of this study, supported by the literature, show the importance of identity, belonging, and voice for women student veterans connected with writing assignments and writing courses during their transition process from the military into higher education. Women student veterans were influenced in these three areas by the transition from military writing to academic writing that mirrored their changing identity from active-duty military personnel to student, the need for belonging in writing courses with their peers, and writing instructor influence over a sense of belonging and a safe space for voices to be heard in the college and the university writing classroom. The suggested practices and

implementation focused upon the importance of identity, belonging, and voice for women student veterans in writing courses. The participants in this study voiced their experiences in a safe space, hopefully benefitting future women student veterans with the formation of identity through writing, the belonging with peers in writing courses, and a safe space for their voices to be heard in writing classrooms.

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