

## Chapter 7

# Reaching the Military Veteran Learner: A Shift in Current Thought

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Military veterans face several difficulties when leaving their regimented lifestyle in uniform to transition to a chaotic civilian population. Reintegration into society often requires veterans to learn new skills or return to college. Veteran students are nontraditional and at times do not fit the mold traditional student retention programs are designed to address. The author traces the evolution of student retention theory from Spady to the present, with respect to the veteran population as nontraditional students, and examines new ideas based not on what colleges are doing, but rather on what students are considering when making the decision to continue their college education.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

American military service members accept a difficult task in defense of our nation and its citizens. Their sacrifice puts aside the opportunity for a traditional progression from high school to college in favor of military service. Research has shown that military veterans forge a unique cultural bond that persists into civilian life (Arkin & Dobrofsky, 1978; Gates, 1970; Jackson et al., 2012). It is reasonable to expect these shared experiences to

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affect how military veteran students acquire and assimilate new knowledge. This chapter examines traditional and contemporary theories about how institutions encourage students to complete their degrees, motivate students to persist toward degree completion, and the possible military service effects on these decisions.

## **BACKGROUND**

Throughout history, our nation has called upon its citizens to join to protect the nation's interests in times of war. After such sacrifice, before 1940, military service members found that opportunities scarce for those who return. Military service members began their civilian lives under-educated, jobless, and often disabled and unable to compete for work within an able-bodied workforce due to the interruption that wartime service created (Bennett, 1996; Bound & Turner, 2002; Falkey, 2014).

The number of returning military personnel at the end of each conflict presents a reintegration challenge both economically and logistically. Without an education, some veterans become homeless, drug dependent, or become incarcerated due to problems assimilating into a civilian society (Bennett, 1996; U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs, 2005). "Wars are marvelously effective full-employment programs, but until the end of World War II, no government had devised a postwar replacement for the economic productivity of a fully mobilized people making and using weapons to kill their enemies" (Bennett, 1996, p. 32). Bennett's point is that war – with its accompanying patriotic fervor – motivates both the soldiers who fight and those for whom they fight. Once the war is over and returning war veterans require jobs when the war effort markets have spun down, they often find scarce opportunities. Patriotism, plentiful in times of war, can become burdensome in times of peace.

Recognizing the negative societal impact such an influx of veterans has on the economy, the government has since provided financial assistance to assist the transition from military to civilian life. Such efforts have achieved various levels of success. The first GI Bill provided both educational benefits and temporary unemployment assistance of \$20 per week for 52 weeks until G.I.s could find work. (Bennett, 1996; Falkey, 2014). Today's Post-9/11 GI Bill provides vastly improved educational benefits capable of funding a four-

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