# Breaking Down Cultural Barriers to Military Entry into Higher Education

Michael J. Hollis

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## The Problem

One problem that I anticipate seeing in my field over the coming years is the problem of military students struggling to transition to and succeed as university and college students. I have worked in higher education for ten of the last 15 years in administrative, teaching, and research roles. I have also served in the Army (active duty and reserves) for 6 years and completed my bachelor's and first master's degree while in the service. As a result of this combination of experiences I have volunteered to work with a large number of soldiers who were trying to obtain their degrees and anticipate doing the same in the future.

While there are numerous problems in this field, the main problem that I have observed over the years is that there is a large cultural barrier between the military and higher education. This problem is an extension of the greater problem of lower-class students not being given adequate preparation for college. When I graduated from high school I had a dream of going to college, but that dream was deferred for several years because it took that long for me to learn what kinds of financial aid programs were available and also because I had not yet learned how to be a functional student. I took a few community college courses straight out of high school but promptly failed them because I had not yet learned how to study and learn in the higher education environment. My impression has always been that the U.S. educational system appears to be designed to keep people in the same socio-economic class structure that they were born into. My high school seemed to share the same belief system that the Army has, a belief that none of our people will amount to anything beyond a lower-class career track, so why would we bother providing them with the information that they need to move beyond it? The burden for this problem also needs to be borne by the universities themselves however. We often speak of social justice and inclusion, but while we try to artificially balance our racial quotas, how often

do we really pursue military veterans? Some universities are obviously better at this then others, but I have to believe, that especially at a number of large research universities that I have worked at over the years, that there is a certain level of fear and misunderstanding about the nature and capabilities of military students that many liberal professors do not wish to confront.

Campuses today are frequently referred to in military circles based upon whether or not they are 'veteran friendly'. Kind of like art, it is difficult to define, but veterans know it when they see it. The primary definitions typically involve a university that removes barriers for military students and provides personnel with prior military service to assist these students with the transition (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; Lokken, Pfeffer, McAuley, & Strong, 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009).

This transition is difficult from many aspects. It is difficult to move from the structured 'uptempo' (high-paced, high-stressed, & extreme situational awareness) environment of the military, especially for those coming out of combat tours, to the almost completely unstructured environment of higher education. These students, such as myself, are easily frustrated when presented with courses and professors who do not have structure and are also easily frustrated with people who do not seem to have the sense of urgency we are used to. Not having an obvious chain of command to get answers to questions form also causes frustrations (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, p. 12, 2009). Additionally, there are reported rates of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or depression/ anxiety that range from 31 percent to 49 percent of recently deployed veterans (Lokken, Pfeffer, McAuley, & Strong, p.46, 2009) making it that much more difficult to settle into the routine of day-to-day life anywhere.

It is easy for universities and their faculty to dismiss these problems though and see them as burdens to overcome; it is more difficult to see them as opportunities to be taken advantage of.

It is difficult for many veterans to sit still or be in crowded places, both of which are problems in a typical university setting. However, this is actually just magnifying what we have known for some time, which is that a large lecture environment is really not a terribly productive learning environment. Should we force the military student to learn to tolerate this environment or should we use this as an opportunity to finally try and find alternatives? Other students are beginning to demand these kinds of structural and pedagogical changes, why not use this opportunity to lead the change movement?

This problem is also now appearing in Central Texas universities. According to Scwartz (October 4, 2009), veteran enrollment at Central Texas colleges and universities has climbed between 20 and 34 percent in the last two years. Student veterans indicate that while they do bring unique experiences to the classroom that they feel others could benefit from, they also find themselves being drawn towards other veterans "because they know where I'm coming from" (Schwartz, October 4, 2009). The article also cites local VA educational officers as indicating that these students have difficulty with the transition, are concerned about how their peer students and faculty will see them, and have difficulty with concentrating, relaxing and forming bonds with other students. Most relevant to this is paper is the finding that "as much as these veterans are having to adjust to college life, college is having to adjust to them" (Schwartz, October 4, 2009). Most local veteran's officers are looking at the unique needs and accommodation factors and trying to implement changes to address them in order to be more 'veteran-friendly'. Just as universities work to improve the cultural competence of faculty members dealing with issues of gender, ethnic, and disability, there is a need for faculty members to be aware that returning veterans have backgrounds that makes them unique.

Military students bring leadership, problem-solving skills and experiential learning into the classroom (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, p. 12, 2009). We know these to be advanced learning skills that will benefit the traditional students around them who have largely yet to develop them. If we fear these students and try to exclusively consign them to veteran's only classes or developmental education courses, as has been suggested by a number of faculty, then we are wasting the opportunity to help our non-military students grow from their experiences. This problem is a two-part problem: 1. we need to help military students successfully transition into the world of academia; and 2. we need to better prepare academia for how to better understand and deal with their military students.

My own personal rationale for working on this project is a sense of debt owed to those that I have served with who have never been able to advance their dreams as I have been lucky enough to do. I especially owe a debt to those who never came back. I believe that as scholars and citizens we do owe it to these men and women to make this transition more seamless as well as to constantly examine ways of incorporating as many non-traditional students as possible into our university culture.

## The Military

The solution to this problem needs to begin with the military. There is a well defined class structure in place between the enlisted ranks (who mostly have no post-secondary education) and the officer ranks (who are required to have college degrees at a minimum). The class rank is evidence by the response given if you accidentally refer to a non-commissioned officer (enlisted leader) by the phrase "sir" (as opposed to Sergeant). The quick response is typically, "don't call me sir, I work for a living!". The class structure is deemed necessary by the military and is typical of military environments world-wide but also leads to a natural dislike of

those with degrees by enlisted personnel who typically only see the educated as commanders and administrative officers. Despite these feelings, over 400,000 (or 19 percent) of service-members in this country participate in the Department of Defense undergraduate and graduate courses (Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, p. 62, 2009). Most of these students must have sought out these programs on their own because few veterans I have spoken to ever recall being talked to about what is available and even fewer know what all is transferable from DOD higher education programs into civilian colleges after leaving.

The initial GI Bill was introduced after World War II to correct the disastrous results of WWI when returning veterans had no jobs or skills to return to after the war. While controversial at the time, the GI Bill is largely credited with providing an education and career for those veterans in the 1940's and 50's. (http://www.gibill.va.gov/GI_Bill_Info/history.htm). The Bill has not kept up with the times however and President Obama has signed into law this summer the Post-9/11 GI Bill which will make education more obtainable to the millions of returning veterans from the Global War on Terrorism. (http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office /Background-on-the-post-9-11-GI-bill/). This new Bill has gone way beyond the one it replaces. As an example using data gathered from these two cited websites, I calculate that instead of the $120 per month I was receiving a few years ago under the old GI Bill, today I would instead receive more than $1,000 per month under the new Bill if I were still eligible, in addition to other benefits. This dramatic improvement will mean that while the old Bill did not really provide much financial incentive to attend college in recent years, the new one will almost certainly make obtaining a degree highly desirable. As a result, I expect military student enrollment to rise at a rate not seen since the original Bill after World War II.

## The University

In addition to my work experience in higher education, as the son of a university administrator (and veteran), I have spent most of my life witnessing the treatment of military students at universities throughout Central Texas. After I began working in higher education and serving in the military myself, I had my own series of unpleasant experiences with anti-military professors and repeatedly felt hostility against the uniform while on campus. My own National Guard commander, a professor himself, actually instructed me to carry civilian clothes when visiting certain campuses to avoid confrontations. I did begin to notice a rather sudden change in this behavior after the Fall of 2001 when it was no longer quite as popular to be anti-military. I do hope that this is a permanent change in mentality but I remain hesitant. I do believe that this new wave of military students that will hopefully arrive as a result of the new GI Bill will bring enough military students to campus to allow any remaining anti-military faculty to become comfortable with them.

The two most commonly stated fears that I hear from faculty that I speak to today about their concerns regarding the influx of military students are that they are concerned with how they are going to manage the remedial needs of these military students and that somehow, campuses are going to be awash in blood from all these psychologically damaged students coming to campus. Obviously, not all faculty feel this way and those that do appear to not be taking action against veterans as a result of their beliefs. The fact that these fears do exist however does convince me that there still needs to be a lot done to improve faculty knowledge of military culture.

I believe that these statements represent a lack of understanding of what the current generation of incoming military student needs. For instance, to counter the first point, my own survey research on graduate student stress on campus, the overwhelming majority of existing

non-military graduate students exhibit signs of personal trauma and emotional instability and state that they feel "depressed or anxious to the point it has been difficult to function", "hopeless", "socially isolated", and that "the academic pressures of this program seem unbearable" etc… (Hollis, 2009). My current dissertation research on violence on campus also indicates that U.S. campuses are already filled with emotionally traumatized and unstable students. Military veterans are actually trained to recognize and cope with these stressors as opposed to the general student population which is not. In regards to the second point, it should also be noted that The National Center for Education Statistics (2003) noted that 28 percent of incoming college freshmen were required to take one or more remedial courses (Parsad, Lewis, & Greene, 2003, p. iv). In other words, it is not just military students needing remedial education, if anecdotal evidence from professors who teach freshmen courses are included, almost all incoming students are academically unprepared for college. Also, due to military requirements for advanced degrees for all officers, a significant number of returning veterans will not be developmental freshmen, but will actually be master's and doctoral students.

**Adult Education Literature and how Military Students Learn**

The reason that I feel this proposal is appropriate for an Adult Education major should also be addressed here. "The higher education community and, in particular, students affairs professionals recognize diverse student subcultures on college campuses, however, student veterans have largely been unnoticed by the literature" (Livingston, p. 3, 2009). There is surprisingly little literature on the issue of how military students learn. This issue is relevant to the field of adult education in that most returning soldiers are older than the traditional students in their classes. Like most older students, they are mature and have three aspects of adult learning theory which actually make them very good students. Merriam, Caffarella, &

Baumgartner (2007) refer to three concepts which illustrate the strengths of military students, self-directed learning, transformational learning, and experiential learning. According to Merriam et al. (2007), "one of the primary goals of [public schools, colleges, and universities] is to enable their students to be lifelong, self-directed learners" (p. 105). Soldiers are trained to improvise, adapt, and find innovative solutions to the problems they are confronted with. By the time they finish their military service, most veterans are actually quite well trained in the art of being self-directed and if they choose to wade into the waters of a hostile educational environment, they will often end up finding their way alone. While this is part of the problem, it also demonstrates that they have also already mastered one of the skills that are important for all students to learn. They often serve as positive role models in the classroom. Merriam et al.'s (2007) definition of transformational learning also involves "dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves in the world in which we live" (p. 130). I have never met a veteran whose views of the world were not radically altered by their experience in the military. Clearly, not all of these changes are easy to deal with. I have personally become much more confident in myself and am more vocal about my opinions as a result of my military experience. This outspokenness and stubbornness has been cited by faculty and fellow students as something that makes me difficult to be in a class with at times. Having seen the same qualities in other military students, I am certain that these are likely qualities that other professors might not appreciate too much. My experience also involved being exposed to cultures of the world and learning to count on them for my very own survival. I also learned what most veterans learn, which is that we are capable of so much more than we ever thought we were, physically, intellectually, and psychologically. The military transforms citizens into soldiers who feel that there is nothing that they cannot do if they work hard enough. This is a good ethic for new adult students.

Furthermore, Brooks (2000) in her chapter on the cultures of transformation indicates that "as adult educators, we often are asked to facilitate transformation in people from cultural backgrounds different from our own… and help traditionally marginalized students in formal education replace silence with their own voice" (p.161), further reinforcing the concept that adult educators should be taking the lead on this issue. The third aspect of adult learning, experiential learning, also is evident here. Service members are trained to constantly reflect on everything they do through constant after action reports (AAR's) where they evaluate what went well, what went poorly, and how to do it better. Many of us still continuously use this same system each semester with each class, and each assignment to seek to constantly learn from our experiences, dramatically improving a military student's ability to practice in continuous critical reflection. What this all means is that adult veterans actually make ideal college students once they learn how to adapt to the culture of academia. They are even more successful when academia adapts to the strengths that they are bringing into academic culture. Regardless, this transition to college after military service is a very difficult transition and a number of adult transitional and stage development theorists indicate that this is a vulnerable time in any student's life, especially those coming from a dramatically different culture (Livingston, p. 5, 2009).

Ultimately, what makes military students effective adult students is that the military is a strong example of a learning organization. While this may seem contradictory to the idea of an organization with a hierarchal structure that may not appear to value open communication between ranks, this is actually a bit of a misconception. Communication within the ranks of the military flows through a fixed chain of command, but through the use of AAR's and frequent open meetings with those in your immediate chain, ideas are quickly spread throughout the organization. From the beginning of their training soldiers are taught two fundamental ideas: 1.

No matter your rank, at any time you may be the highest ranking survivor in your organization, therefore you must be qualified to do everything your commanders and fellow soldiers can do; 2. Due to the military's "up or out" promotion system, everyone in the military is being groomed for a leadership position and once you achieve the second lowest rank in the military you are now in charge of training those below you. Every solider constantly trains for perfection in their own field, co-trains to learn the skills of other soldiers that they may have to replace if they fall in battle, and constantly train for the next level of leadership they will have to take on when they are next promoted. The "up or out" system ensures that if you do not get yourself promoted within three years of becoming mathematically eligible, you will be kicked out of the military. Senge (2006) refers to the fact that today organizations cannot succeed with just those at the top doing all the learning for an organization (p. 4). This is what makes learning organizations a must for all industries today. This is also what makes it so much more important in the military. The fighting is usually done by the lowest ranking in the organization and they are therefore most motivated to learn their field well. Therefore military personnel, despite assumptions to the contrary, are often the greatest connoisseurs of education and are quite proficient at learning quickly and from a variety of sources. When your life often depends on finding quick solutions to problems encountered in the field and rapidly disseminating these solutions, it is critical that the military remain structured in a way that allows this. Despite the heavy levels of bureaucracy, soldiers usually seem to find a way to get this done.

**Limitations and Challenges**

It should also be mentioned here that there will be a number of challenges and barriers to any proposed solution to this problem. The first being that many veterans do find themselves leaving military service not only with emotional trauma, but also impoverished, and often with

dependents to support. Many are looking for the quickest route to a successful career transition and will not be happy with courses that are seen as irrelevant to that goal (such as most core courses). Resistance to formal education will also be built up amongst many enlisted persons as there is a large class difference between enlisted (those largely with no post-secondary degrees) and officers (where post-secondary degrees are required). This class difference has led to a regular bashing of the educated officers amongst the senior enlisted ranks and makes many soldiers reluctant to seek out formal education. A better immersion and mentorship program will hopefully help reduce this. With this in mind it is time to examine what might work.

## The Solution

So what works? This solution that I am proposing is a two-part program. Part one is to ensure that students who are able to successfully get into college have a means of assisting them with the basics of adapting to academic life. Firsthand accounts of this transition suggest that this is not being done very often today. According to an Associated Press wire story by David Mercer (2008), one student sums up the problem when he describes his first attempt at enrolling in college. "Nothing Derek Blumke saw during three Air Force tours in Afghanistan prepared him for college life" (p.1). He discusses how he was unable to find answers to basic questions because "he wasn't yet a student" (p.1). His story is not unique in that many veterans are "finding that colleges and universities are only beginning to figure out how to help soldiers, sailors, and others transition back to civilian, social, and academic life" (p. 1). Some universities are successfully finding ways to integrate service members into academic life. For instance, at Cleveland State University (Ohio) they have a program called Supportive Education for the Returning Veteran (SERV) where the director of the program meets with every incoming veteran, assists them with the transition, and arranges vets-only classes for the first few semesters

which allow military students to work together to find solutions to the transitional problems they are facing in their other courses. (Lawson, 2009). “This slow transition is imperative to the overall success of the veterans’ academic experiences… the idea is not to isolate people, but to integrate people” (p.1).

**Proposal Part 1: Military Support in Higher Education**

Part one of my proposal is to create a program at universities that offer the traditional support network that military personnel are used to and allow them to work together collaboratively with staff, faculty, and prior military students to figure out for themselves how to adapt to their new environment. One strength of veterans is their ability to rapidly adapt to different environments and cultures. While many aspects of educational culture will seem hostile to the military student, we are quite well trained at survival in hostile environments and can find ways to adapt if allowed to work together towards solutions.

My interpretation of all the literature cited in this article, as well as changes that I have witnessed this semester at various universities has suggested to me that the greatest asset a university can have towards recruiting military personnel is a strong veteran’s officer who can serve as a point of contact for the veteran-student and assist with the academic and transitional needs of that student. I also now believe that the second most important asset a university can have are programs that allow military students to have a mentorship program (with fellow military students) and specialty introduction courses to aid in the transition of military personnel to their new academic careers. Military personnel are required to take a number of classes when transitioning, so these would likely be well received. For instance, all new soldiers take a series of courses during basic training to acculturate them to military lifestyles. Whenever they change duty stations or deploy overseas they also take specific courses to learn the culture of their new

environment. Finally, when soldiers return home and when they leave active duty they are forced to take courses to learn how to return to civilian life. From my own personal experience I can state that these courses allow military personnel to ask the ‘stupid’ or obvious questions that they would be embarrassed to ask about in any other environment and provides informative information in a safe and familiar environment.

I believe that this combination of three factors: A strong VA officer who is able and willing to assist in all areas of the military to student transition, mentorship programs pairing up existing military students with incoming military students, and individual transition courses will come together to provide military students with a smoother transition and higher military student success rates.

Paying for these three programs is also somewhat straightforward. Most universities already have a designated VA officer or office with a wide variety of personnel working there. Some smaller universities typically appear to have someone in their financial aid or student affairs office designated as a VA officer in addition to their regular duties. Larger universities tend to have a designated full time office for veterans. All of these options can be successful without a change in the existing budget as long as it can be determined that the existing personnel are up to the task and current on the needs of military students. This could be accomplished by: 1. interviewing military students about their experience with the office(r); and 2. consulting with local military education offices to determine what they need to be offering.

Financing the mentor option would not be required in that soliciting volunteers from existing military students should be sufficient. The third part of this proposal is the one that has the most cost issues associated. Creating separate course sections is a financial gamble, but if enough students pay to take the course (especially if they can be taken for degree credit in lieu of

normal freshman gateway courses) then the courses should not only pay for themselves but also make a profit through increased military student retention.

To evaluate the effectiveness of this stage of the proposal, interviews with military students as they progress through or drop out of the program should be combined with statistical data on how successful the students are (through a self-reported transition to academic life instrument as well as institutional numbers on grades and retention).

**Proposal Part 2: Exposing Higher Education Administrators, Student Affairs Personnel, and Professors to Military Learning in the Field**

Part two of my proposal is a bit different than anything currently in use. It comes from a community relations program that we used to do in the Army Reserves and Army National Guard. It was an operation called Operation Boss Lift. In order to ensure that the employers of reservists were supportive of and understood the need for the time off that most reservists need from work, Operation Boss Lift flew the employers of reservists to training locations at Fort Hood, Texas so that they could watch their employee-soldiers in the field. This project went a long ways towards breaking down the misunderstandings that were often present between employers and their reservist soldiers. While recently listening to two professors speak of the culture shock they experienced the first time they visited the somewhat militaristic Cabela's store in Buda, it occurred to me that this type of program would actually benefit professors and university administrators who are planning programs for veterans in higher education.

In their 2002 program planning book, Boone, Safrit, and Jones discussed the need for understanding the culture of those you are planning programs for when they stated "an adult educator's decisions with regard to specific programming strategies should be based, along with other factors, on the particular culture of the learning system towards which the program may be

directed" (p. 10). Therefore it is critical that if professors and administrators are going to properly design materials, programs, curricula, and support programs for veterans, then we must find a way for academics to better understand these groups. The best way to learn about Mexican culture would be to visit and live in Mexico. The best way to learn about European culture would be to live and study in Europe. It stands to logic that there is therefore only one good way to teach academics about military culture.

Therefore the second part of my proposal involves a cultural immersion program for higher education personnel at military installations throughout the country where they can interact with service members, understand their current educational structure, and learn what their needs, desires, strengths, and weaknesses are. If public affairs and military educational personnel were involved in arranging these visits they could be done with minimal disruption to daily routines and provide valuable insight. Evaluation of both programs will involve a combination of factors such as qualitative interviews with service members regarding the effectiveness of their transition that can be compared with other universities and veterans not participating in this program. Assuming that effective programs will also grow through word of mouth, a statistical analysis of whether or not participating universities have noticeable growth in graduating veterans will also offer quantitative evaluation options.

Choosing participants for this program will be difficult. I believe that while nearly all faculty and administration would benefit from the program, it would not be cost effective to send everyone and there would certainly be some heavy resistance amongst academic personnel. As a result, I would recommend soliciting volunteers that represent a strong cross-section of those involved in planning for and producing programs for military students including: The VA officer, Dean of Students personnel, counseling staff, and a stratified sample of professors.

The outcomes and value to this part of the project would be that it would allow those working most closely with military students the opportunity to better understand how students learn in their existing workplaces. Incidentally, a similar program would be useful for better understanding other non-traditional student groups. This knowledge will hopefully allow academic personnel to interact with military students in an environment where the future military students will feel most comfortable and also allow planner to hopefully observe unique learning skills that they can then than transfer to classroom activities.

The budget for this would be more difficult than the other suggestions in this program but it is workable out of the normal U.S. military training budget. The way that we did it with Boss Lift was to find helicopter pilots and drivers who were in need of their monthly or annual flight/ driving hours (both are required to maintain a minimum for proficiency and licensure purposes) and use these trips to fulfill that need. This practice is already in use on colleges when Army National Guard pilots fly university ROTC cadets to field training exercises. A similar practice is already in place when Air National Guard units use football stadium flyovers as part of their normal cross-country and formation flying proficiency requirements. The result is that it does not use up any military tax dollars or time that would not otherwise be utilized in a similar manner. In terms of compensating university workers, it would be ideal if the compensation could come from existing training and development budgets. Otherwise, it would need to be an uncompensated voluntary exercise.

## Summary

The soldier scholar tradition is something that appears in literature since the earliest days of recorded history. It has often been cited as the ideal of what good citizens should strive for. Even Plato discussed the equal importance of physical and mental development in creating the

whole human. Most military veterans do move onto other careers when they finish their service and many join simply to find the financing to be able to move on to something better. The U.S. Government has recently introduced the new Post-9/11 GI Bill to help those who have served in the last eight years handle this transition better as we are now expecting to see the largest number of veterans returning to school since the Vietnam War. President Obama recently stated, while discussing this new bill, that,

> "The contributions that our service men and women can make to this nation do not end when they take off that uniform," Obama added. "We owe a debt to all who serve. And when we repay that debt to those bravest Americans among us, then we are investing in our future. Not just their future, but also the future of our own country" (McMichael, 2009).

I believe that this does recognize that we need to start preparing our universities for these new students and that ensuring their transition to civilian careers is in all of our best interest. We saw after WWI and Vietnam what happened when we neglected our soldiers returning from war. We must not let our own biases of what we feel academia should be keep us from achieving these goals. The Ivory Tower is not our own personal playground to have fun with the theoretical ideas of theory and social justice while not allowing other voices and viewpoints in. It belongs to the public and we need to serve the public, whoever they may be and wherever they may come from. Public service is the one thing that I think we can learn most from our soldier scholars.

## Proposal Summation

- **Problem**: Breaking down cultural barriers to veteran integration into higher education through the removal of myths surrounding veterans and education.

- **Needs Analysis**: Growing number of veterans returning to school. New Post9/11 GI Bill signed this summer, largest change since WWII. Minimal knowledge of how to prepare from both veterans and professorate perspectives.
- **Stakeholders**: Veterans returning to school, higher education faculty, administration, and military education specialists.
- **Plan**:
    - **1**. Establish support and mentoring programs for veterans at universities.
    - **2.** Dual cultural exchange programs. Expose both groups to the cultural reality of the other group to lesson misconceptions and improve relations.
- **Budget:** Can be worked into normal military training schedule to minimize military cost. Cost for universities will be in terms of time lost. Should be incorporated into normal training budget.
- **Timeline**: Ongoing project. Could begin immediately and continue indefinitely.
- **Outcomes**:
    - Benefits for soldiers: smoother transitions and higher degree completion rates for veterans leading to good jobs and careers.
    - Benefits for universities: improved enrollment of students in general and non-traditional students in particular. Added income from students and military GI Bill and tuition reimbursement programs.
- **Evaluation**: Determine dual participant self-assessments of effectiveness of cultural exchanges as aid. Compare quantitative data on whether participating veterans and universities have higher enrollment and degree completion rates.

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