Winter April 15, 2014

One Combat Zone to the Next: A Literature Review on Student Veterans, Microaggressions, and Higher Education

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COM 610

Winter 2014
**Student Veterans in Higher Education**

Grand Valley State University (GVSU) is home to over 600 students who identify as military service persons, reservists, or veterans (S. Lipnicki, personal communication, April 24, 2014). The Million Records Project, released March 24, 2014 (Cate, 2014), predicted that the number of student veterans will continue to grow on college campuses across the country as the United States government continues to withdraw the number of active servicemen and women from global conflict zones. It is then reasonable to assume that GVSU will see an increase in the number of student veterans, particularly because GVSU continues to be named a Military Friendly Institution by GIJOBS.COM and Military Advanced Education (S. Lipnicki, personal communication, April 24, 2014).

Cate (2014) reported not only an increased number of student veterans but also an increased degree completion rate for student veterans pursuing two-year and four-year degree programs. The Millions Records Project indicated this is counterintuitive to popular opinion:

“Contrary to theoretical predictions, student veterans are actually succeeding in postsecondary environments at the same level as their traditional student peers. This topic should be further explored to discover the factors – both character traits of student veterans and institutional supports – the lead to positive academic outcomes and how to replicate such practices for other nontraditional students, thereby increasing the overall completion rate” (p. 66).

One factor not considered in the Million Records Project is how student veterans are transitioning to the classroom and other experiences of student veterans with the reintegration process. While Cate (2014) provided detailed accounting of degree completion rates, time-to-completion, level of education, and degree fields through the use of the Montgomery and Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits, the research did not address transitional issues for student veterans returning to the classroom during or after military service. The research did consider that most
student veterans are identified by their schools as “nontraditional” students with additional work and family obligations not usually attributed to an incoming college student, but this designation does not encompass the unique set of circumstances faced by student veterans.

**Reintegration: Challenges for Student Veterans**

Currently, there is a lack of research on the experiences of student veterans in the classroom. Much of the current literature “documents the mental and physical outcomes of deploying to war…there is a paucity of research examining current soldiers’ and veterans’ lived experiences of returning home and transitioning into civilian life” (Demers, 2011, p. 161). Given this dearth of research, there is a real opportunity to expand the current field of information available on higher education students with veteran (or active duty) status. While not directly addressing higher education, Demers (2011) observed:

> “Veterans described three key challenges to returning home: lack of respect from civilians, holding themselves to a higher standard than civilians, and not fitting into the civilian world…the change in status led to a loss of self-esteem and sense of self-worth” (p. 170) and that “veterans referred to themselves as not being ‘normal’ or ‘regular’ when compared to civilians” (p. 173).

Demers (2011) utilized focus groups as a way to acquire qualitative information, stating this facilitates interaction and generates discussion that might not be obtained during personal interviews. Through this method,

> “not only will opportunities for storytelling facilitate veterans’ ability to relearn civilian social norms and become ‘re-membered’ into civilian culture, but they have the potential for teaching civilians about military culture, thus narrowing the civilian-military cultural gap and creating stronger support networks for returning veterans” (p. 175).

Recommendations for future research included employing “mixed methods” such as focus groups and interviews for obtaining personal narratives on the transition from military culture to civilian life. Gwin, Selber, Chavkin and Williams (2012) agreed that while there is
much literature on non-traditional students, little sufficient research has assessed the challenges specific to student veterans. “Few studies have been conducted evaluating the needs of student veterans or the services and policies helping veterans transition into higher education. In addition, the existing studies have been primarily qualitative” (p. 27). While Gwin et al. (2012) relied on quantitative assessment; many of the respondents were able to provide specific details and answers to survey questions allowing more personal narratives regarding their experiences on campus. The research reported limitations and acknowledged that a “mixed research methods that reveal both quantitative and qualitative data will be most useful in determining how to best serve this population,” specifically recommending focus groups (p. 36).

On campus, student veterans described challenges similar to the overall transition and reintegration into civilian life. Student veterans were concerned with connecting to their peers, blending in on campus, and finding appropriate resources and supports (DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell, 2008). DiRamio et al. (2008) sought to create a holistic approach to addressing the needs of student veterans, and noted that some universities are not prepared to handle an influx of student veterans in terms of systemic resources and supports, such as not enough disabled parking spaces, no dedicated spaces for student veterans, lack of campus knowledge of veterans, and limited financial resources. In response to this, the research proposed that universities invest time and energy into “Transition Coaches” who can liaison with different offices on campus on behalf of or in addition to the student veteran. Where the research perhaps derails from best practices is in the following recommendation:

“Identification of each student-veteran is the key to coordinating the efforts of campus professionals across functional areas including academic affairs, student life, and central administration. Of course, identification should be voluntary, but because many of these students want to keep a low profile, a reasonable amount of pressure should be exerted to identify as many as possible to ensure an inclusive campus program for veterans” (p. 93).
While student veterans are certainly looking to institutions to provide inclusive programming, not all student veterans wish to be identified as such, for valid reasons. As Bonar and Domenici (2011) stated, most student veterans are not physically or psychologically disabled and can be “stigmatized” by the “wounded warrior” stereotype of returning soldiers (p. 204). Bonar and Domenici (2011) employed a methodology of “clinical vignettes” from counseling sessions, reviewing sessions of three undergraduate student veterans. In line with previous literature, the student veterans voiced feeling isolated and being out of place on campus. One of the limitations first discussed is that no female veteran students were included in the clinical case studies. DiRamio et al. (2008) also noted that “a subgroup of student veterans that deserve special attention is women” (p. 96).

**The Needs of Women Veterans**

Mattocks, Haskell, Krebs, Justice, Yano, and Brandt (2011) examined the challenges of women veterans returning home from war, stating:

> “Women’s wartime experiences and the challenges they face when trying to reintegrate into their work, family, and social lives post-deployment have been overshadowed by the experiences of [male] veterans facing similar challenges” (p. 537).

Mattocks et al. (2011) used a semi-structured interview format to speak with nineteen women veterans about their military experiences and the challenges of returning home. The research uncovered two issues not addressed in the literature on male veteran. The first was military sexual trauma, where the participants described instances ranging from jokes and inferences that promotions were earned by providing sexual favors to harassment and sexual assault and rape. The researchers surmised that women veterans were unlikely to seek medical help or assistance from the Office of Veteran Affairs (VA) out of fear of similar treatment from individuals within the VA. The second was difficulties readjusting to family life, specifically
relational issues from being separated from their children for long periods of time. “None of the women in the study reported that they received any help with this family readjustment process from either the military or from the VA, and were left to renegotiate their relationships with their children on their own” (p. 543). Mattocks et al. (2011) stated that this remained an important challenge for women veterans for which the VA is not mandated to provide services or support.

Demers (2013) conducted focus groups with seventeen women veterans to discover the unique experiences of female veterans returning home from war. This work was based in philosophical framework “that humans’ realities are influenced by the world in which they live, and humans cannot separate themselves from those realities…[and] assumes that the researcher’s presuppositions are a valuable guide to the inquiry and interpretation of those narratives” (p. 495). From the focus groups, Demers (2013) articulated a unique issue faced by returning women veterans:

“They must also overcome the consequences of the psychological war they fought with [male] comrades…women veterans must struggle with what it means to be female in a society where civilians are perplexed by them and do know whether to treat them like ‘one of the guys…or like a lady’” (p. 505).

All of the women veterans interviewed for this study alluded to masking or changing the feminine aspects of their personas. “They were engaged in a constant tension between being male enough to earn respect but not so male that they became a threat to their comrades” (p. 505). Demers (2013) concluded that women veterans returning home must now reconcile a more masculine persona with their previous selves, adding another layer to the reintegration process. Limited research is available on veteran reintegration and higher education; research addressing the specific needs of female student veterans is even scarcer yet clearly needed.
Microaggressions in Higher Education

The proposed research for this literature review is an examination of the experience of students with veteran status in a higher education setting, specifically an overview of interpersonal communications that may fall into the realm of “microaggressions.” Sue (2010) defined microaggressions as “the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual-orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group” (p. 5). Sue (2010) outlined three categories of microaggressions: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Microassaults tend to be more intentional and conscious, while microinsults and microinvalidations are often unintentional and subtle. Sue (2010) referred to this at the “new” racism, where the attacks are often unclear and ambiguous, but equally or even more damaging than overt acts of racism. Microaggressions can often appear to be a harmless or offhand statement, leaving the recipient confused and unsure if the comment was rooted in bias or malice. The research also addressed several negative impacts of microaggressive stressors, specifically biological/physiological reactions, cognitive appraisal, emotional responses, and behavioral/coping strategies.

Sue (2010) included several key examples of how microaggressions manifest in the higher education setting (adapted from p. 240):

- Faculty, staff, and students may unintentionally insult, invalidate, or assail the identities of minority groups in interpersonal interactions.
- Curriculum materials may ignore minority groups or portray them inaccurately.
- Lack of diversity on campus (faculty and students) may represent a symbolic cue that diversity is not welcome on campus.
- Environmental factors, such as the foods served in cafeterias, entertainment selections on campus, decorations, and what events are celebrated.
Institutional policies that encourage the status quo and serve to further oppress rather than liberate diverse groups.

The campus climate may appear unwelcoming due to the prevalence of harassment, inappropriate jokes, and depictions of minorities that are not corrected by individuals in the majority group(s).

In previous research, Sue (with Ling, Torino, Capodilupo and Rivera, 2009) addressed microaggressions in the classroom, in this instance related to race, to include “ascription of intelligence, alien in own land, denial of racial reality, and assumption of criminality. While racial microaggressions were most often delivered verbally and nonverbally by both White students and instructors, they also made their appearance in the course content as well” (p. 188). Sue et al. (2009) further addressed the “cognitive, behavioral, and emotional processes” and ramifications of microaggressions in the classroom. These processes can then distract from the learning outcomes of the courses, particularly if not addressed by the instructor or administration of the institution. The research then provided educators with methods of addressing microaggressions in the higher education setting; suggesting special training should be required for instructors to conduct difficult discussions related to race. A limitation to this research was a lack of diversity in the focus group, which was not gender or race balanced.

Minikel-Lacocque (2012) cited that most of the current literature linked to microaggressions is published by Sue and his colleagues. This body work is often considered the authority on the subject of microaggressions. Minikel-Lacocque (2012) looked at the language used to describe certain instances on a college campus, however, and cautioned against using the term microaggressions in too broad a context:

“Adding intentional, overtly racist offenses to the category of ‘microaggressions’ has a deleterious effect in the effort to combat racism for two reasons. First, it has the potential to diminish the harmful nature of the act as well as diminish the target’s reaction to the aggression. Second, expanding the original notion of microaggressions to include ‘microassualts’ takes away from an essential message that the concept of
microaggressions has the power to communicate to a wide audience: The insidious, slippery, sometimes hard-to-name nature of microaggressions is precisely where their power lies to cause damage” (p. 459).

It is important to note that expanding the nature and definition of microaggressions can weaken the term and the concept it represents, even if well intended. Going forward, research in the area of microaggressions should exercise caution in using and applying the term without truly representing microaggressions and their impact. Minikel-Lacocque (2012) argued a greater understanding of microaggressions as a term is needed, and “that the term microaggression is at times misused within academia and [that] misuse has potentially negative consequences” (p. 432). The research, coined a “qualitative case study,” utilized a methodology that treated each student’s experiences as a separate case and then compared and contrasted those accounts in a “cross-case analysis” (p. 440). The research was also based in Critical Race Theory, which is addressed later in this literature review.

**Intersectionality and Research on Bias**

Boysen (2013) stated “the focus of bias in the classroom research has been on racial and ethnic prejudice, and these findings may not generalize to sexist stereotypes” (p. 297). The researcher designed scenarios in which sexists comments and attitudes were confronted in the classroom. The findings were that students were more comfortable and felt the instructor was significantly more effective when sexist behaviors were confronted. A weakness is the study was that the confrontations occurred in a laboratory or staged setting, rather than in actual classrooms. Female psychology students were also the only participants, and the limitations noted that inclusion of men and students from natural sciences would make the findings more applicable to a larger student body. The scenarios also focused on a particular stereotype of
female students not being mathematically inclined in an attempt to gauge if sexism is keeping female students out of male-dominated majors and careers (Boysen, 2013).

Much of the research on microaggressions focuses on one element, such as racism, sexism, or heterosexism. One flaw is this approach is that students can belong to more than one minority group. McCabe (2009) focused on an intersection of racial and gender-based microaggressions described by students at a large, public, Midwestern university that is predominantly white (referred to as MU, presumably to protect the identities of the participants). McCabe (2009) noted:

“Microaggressions are powerful because, despite being invisible to the perpetrator, they exact a toll on the recipient’s psyche. Microaggressions result in students feeling isolated and out of place at the university…in contrast to dominant beliefs that universities are open, tolerant, and meritocratic” (p. 135).

McCabe (2009) utilized extended personal interviews, conducted with multiple students over the course of the academic year, along with focus groups comprised of students from diverse races. This provided a powerful narrative, giving humanity to the scenarios in which students are afflicted by microaggressions. One limitation of employing this method was that the results are highly specific to those students interviewed at MU. The findings cannot necessarily be applied to other universities, or even other students attending MU. By looking at microaggressions through an intersectional lens, McCabe (2009) also provided very specific findings:

“Like Latinas and black men, black women experience microaggressions tied to their specific racial and gender identities. However, rather than being tied to a specific stereotype about their group, black women’s accounts of microaggressions were tied to a particular setting – the classroom. Other students of color and white women also described classroom microaggressions, but reports from black women were more frequent” (p. 141).
These microaggressions faced in the classroom resulted in black women being less likely to contribute to class discussions, feeling their opinions were not valued as highly by classmates (and in some cases, instructors). “In this way, these racial and gender microaggressions take a toll on students’ mental and emotional well-being. Students reported feeling isolated, alienated, and burdened by the task of representing their racial group or race-gender group” (McCabe, 2009, p. 142). While these reports were specific to black women, it is reasonable to theorize that microaggressions in the classroom have far-reaching effects on any students outside of the majority group(s).

**Microaggressions in the Classroom**

As Boysen (2012) explains, “subtle forms of prejudice called microaggressions occur in college classrooms, but the effective methods of managing such prejudice are not clear” (p. 122). Boysen cites previous research (Boysen & Vogel, 2009; Boysen, Vogel, Cope & Hubbard, 2009) in 2012 to clarify the purpose of extending research on bias in the classroom:

“Classroom bias can be defined as the subtle and blatant ways that prejudice, discrimination, and stereotypes emerge in teaching situations…bias in the classroom is relatively common with about 40% of teachers and 50% of students reporting an incident in the last year. The incidents tend to be subtle rather than blatant. Teachers report that stereotypes are the most frequent type of classroom bias…considering how frequently subtle forms of bias emerge in the classroom, more information is needed on teacher’s and student’s perceptions of it and their beliefs about how it should be managed” (Boysen, 2012, p. 122-123).

Boysen conducted multiple studies on microaggressions in the classroom, and in each instance reported significant findings indicating the prevalence of subtle forms of bias, particularly from racial and ethnic minority students and students who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and/or Transgendered (LGBT). The limitations of these studies all pointed back to a lack of diversity in the sample respondents, suggesting that the frequency of bias in the
classroom could have been reported as higher if more minority students had participated in the studies. The research findings, along with the limitations, raised the concern that microaggressions occurring in the college classroom are impacting the students’ success (Boysen, 2012; Boysen & Vogel, 2009; Boysen et al., 2009).

The responses of minority student groups in Boysen’s work mirrored the findings in much of Sue’s work, although Sue et al. (2009) also illuminated the reluctance of minority students to address microaggressions in the classroom:

“In addition to feeling attacked or invalidated by the microaggressions, many found their pain accentuated by the defensiveness and reluctance of White students to honestly dialogue about race…many students expressed strong fears about negative consequences that would ensue should they pursue the dialogue. Interestingly, it appeared that strong negative reactions were also attributed to how professors ineffectively dealt with racial dialogues” (p. 187-188).

Instructors in the higher education setting face a multi-faceted role, one of educator and facilitator of discussions regarding microaggressions, one of possible instigator or perpetrator of microaggressions through classroom dialogue and/or course materials, and also another role as a potential recipient of microaggressions from students or other instructors. Gomez, Khurshid, Freitag, and Johnson Lachuk (2011) looked at the microaggressions encountered by graduate teaching assistants, who fulfill a dual role of instructor and student. Citing literature on diversifying the faculty pool at colleges and universities, Gomez et al. (2011) suggested that “culturally and linguistically diverse teacher educators are more likely to engage in class discussions about issues of race, class, gender, ability, and social justice” (p. 1189). A diverse group of instructors may be able to respond to incidents of bias in the classroom in a more effective way, but that may make the instructor a target of bias statements and actions as well. Graduate teaching assistances of color or international heritage reported being seen as “pushing a
personal agenda, as opposed to acting in accordance with the values of the program, [other instructors and students] acted subtly to invalidate and undermine their expertise, authority, and experiences” (p. 1197). Many teaching assistances reported being ignored or bypassed, with students seeking out a white teaching assistant rather than one of color or international heritage or treating them as the white teaching assistants’ subordinates.

Gomez et al. (2011) used focus groups and semi-structured interviews to gather narratives on the lived experiences of graduate teaching assistances of color and those coming from international contexts. In the research, the school was renamed “State University”:

“While the academy doors have opened to persons who formerly were not schooled there, many continue to feel marginalized by its policies and practices. The doors may be open, but in predominantly white institutions such as State University, those who are linguistically, racially, and culturally different than the majority understand that who they are, what they think, and how they speak and behave continually will be scrutinized and questioned” (p. 1199).

Gomez et al. (2011) also cited Critical Race Theory in the importance of collecting and sharing narrative experiences, which is discussed in the next section.

Boatright-Horowitz, Frazier, Harps-Logan, and Crockett (2013) collected the impressions of students when exposed to tenants of white privilege and how both white and minority students viewed white privilege in an undergraduate psychology course. Students participated in an online survey that presented different scenarios. Students were then asked if those scenarios represented white privilege. Both white and minority students ranked “obtaining career advice” and “finding professional mentorship” as being highly related to white privilege, meaning students recognized that minority students still struggle with these items. The research also found that simply reviewing the list of items considered to be white privilege appeared to increase the knowledge and acceptance of white privilege by white students. This is an important finding, as it
demonstrated that education and exposure to oppression can positively alter the perspective of the majority population.

**Critical Race Theory and Personal Narratives**

Much of the research pertaining to microaggressions utilized Critical Race Theory (CRT), “which draws from and extends a broad literature base in law, sociology, history, ethnic studies, and women’s studies” (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Scholars began extending CRT into education in the early 1990’s, and it is frequently cited in current discussions on racism and higher education. Solorzano et al. (2000) outline five elements that represent the basic CRT model:

“(a) the centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of subordination, (b) the challenge to dominant ideology, (c) the commitment to social justice, (d) the centrality of experiential knowledge, and (e) the transdisciplinary perspective…the critical race theory framework for education is different from other CRT frameworks because it simultaneously attempts to foreground race and racism in the research as well as challenge the traditional paradigms, methods, texts, and separate discourse on race, gender, and class by showing how these social constructs intersect to impact on communities of color” (p. 63).

Solorzano et al. (2000) used focus groups, as did many other studies cited in this review, which “examines these students’ lived experiences and show how they can provide a depth of understanding, afford outsiders with greater insight, and be a guide to further research” (p. 64). The focus groups gathered for this purpose focused on racial microaggressions and racial campus climate, with findings congruent with other similar studies. In conclusion, the study offered this critical finding:

“The experiences of these studies demonstrates that even at high levels of accomplishment (i.e. at elite undergraduate universities), where educational conditions might on the surface appear to be equal, inequality and discrimination still exist – albeit in more subtle and hidden forms” (p. 71).
Minikel-Lacocque (2012) employed CRT framework as well, noting “neutrality and objectivity are understood not only as unattainable, but also as undesirable entities that lead to the misrepresentation of the experiences of people of color and detract from the kind of knowledge that becomes possible through relationships…thus, in keeping with CRT, relationships are at the core of the study presented” (p. 438-439). What may be discouraging is that over a decade later, the narratives provided by the students in research are not unlike those presented in Solorzano et al. (2000).

Morfin, Perez, Parket, Lynn, and Arrona (2006) further supported the use of narratives as “a key aspect of the narrative scholarship in CRT is its focus on how stories of racism are quite personal and appear so for a reason: They attempt to make the ready question whether any person should be subjected to the treatment detailed in the story” (p. 251-252). Morfin et al. provided a comprehensive overview of CRT in education, including an extensive review of literature supporting and dissuading the use of CRT in the higher education setting, along with research on educational policy and diversity as a compelling state interest.

“CRT makes racism the center of legal review and critique in terms of how the law is developed and administered regarding its impact on people of color. The central themes of storytelling and counternarratives, interest convergence, and Whiteness as property have been used as benchmark lenses of analysis under CRT” (p. 255).

“A CRT analysis of education and affirmative action law, particularly in terms of the evidence generated through counternarratives and counterstories, can serve as a potential link with other movements (e.g. gender, social, class) in terms of galvanizing progressive coalitions for political opportunity and activism. The diversity as compelling state interest standard should be fostered and moved on by higher education leaders” (p. 264-265).

**The Importance of Campus Climate**

Microaggressions in the classroom can occur during discourse between instructors and students, allowing instructors an opportunity to address the comments or issues immediately.
When microaggressions occur frequently outside of the classroom setting, the interactions can create an unpleasant campus climate. Campus climate, for the purposes of this literature review, is defined as “an apt characterization entailing key dimensions of an organization along with members’ perceptions of and attitudes toward those dimensions...the study of climate is especially attuned to the perceptions and needs of traditionally underrepresented groups” (Bryant Rockenbach & Mayhew, 2014, p. 41-42). Bryant Rockenbach and Mayhew (2014) outlined the effects of negative and positive climates on student outcomes, noting “exposure to campus climates marred by prejudice and intolerance has the potential to weaken for all students [the ability] to persist” (p. 42). This research, conducted via student surveys, measured student satisfaction with the spiritual (religious) campus climate. As a departure from previous research, the results indicated “the nonsignificant role of microaggressions in predicting satisfaction” (p. 57), though this would only relate to microaggressions based on spirituality or religion, not on race, gender, or sexual orientation.

Woodford, Howell, Kulick, and Silverschanz (2013) explored the prevalence of a single homophobic statement and how students reported using that statement on campus (“That’s so Gay”). The research demonstrated how microaggressions can infiltrate every aspect of campus life, from conversations in common areas to the gym to the classroom. Woodford et al. (2013) stated “little attention has been given to the subtle heterosexism such as gay jokes and homophobic slurs” and utilized a campus climate survey to determine the factors associated with the use of the phrase “That’s so Gay” (p. 419-420). The survey research focused on white male undergraduate students, and the results showed many students do not recognize that phrase (or similar phrases) as heterosexist or as a microaggression that can be damaging to LGBT students. The researchers pointed to a need for more education on college campuses about heterosexism
and LGBT awareness, stating the prevalence of “That’s so Gay,” while appearing insensitive but benign to most students, could derail the learning outcomes of both LGBT students and other students who recognize the phrase as offensive. While previously cited work addressed the importance of confronting microaggressions in the classroom, Woodford et al. (2013) argued it may be even more important for institutions to evaluate the overall climate campus in this regard.

Harwood, Browne Hunt, Mendenhall, and Lewis (2012) contested that “although PWIs [Predominantly White Institutions] have become more diverse, they have done relatively little to change the culture of their campuses…teaching practices, student support services, and the overall campus environments have not evolved with the changes in student diversity” (p. 159). Harwood et al. (2012) reviewed the experiences of students of color living in residence halls on campus, and evaluated how the persistence of racial microaggressions sometimes outweighed the benefits of living in the student dormitories. These microaggressions ranged from seemingly innocuous racial jokes and comments to more hateful actions, such as writing racial slurs on shared spaces within the dormitories; s problem further complicated by what students perceived as inaction on the part of Resident Assistants and university staff. Consistent with previous works cited, Harwood et al. (2013) employed focus groups in a semi-structured interview style to collect personal narratives from the students of color residing in campus housing. The research “revealed the complexity of the issues that arise in the university residence halls and affect students academically, emotionally, physically, and psychosocially…the overall campus climate shapes attitudes about campus housing and the interactions of students inside the residence hall environment” (p. 169).

Another factor that speaks to campus climate is the research and scholarship conducted at a university. Harper (2012) concluded in a campus racial climate study of multiple institutions,
“racism was rendered taboo” and most campus environments promoted racial silence (p. 15).

The author stated research on racism in higher education is limited and posited that:

“If minoritized persons were invited to explicitly name what they have experienced, it will become clear to researchers and others that racism is indeed worthy of more serious empirical examination and documentation” (p. 15).

Harper (2012) conducted an analysis of 255 peer-reviewed journal articles, using search terms “racist” and “racism” and included articles where either of those phrases appeared in the article title as well as “discussion” and “implementation” sections. One of the key findings was the “anything but racism” approach:

“In an attempt to make sense of their findings, authors theorized and offered assorted guesses in the discussion sections of their articles. Such statements were typically prefaced with ‘perhaps,’ and often included the words ‘may,’ ‘might,’ ‘possibly,’ ‘could be,’ and ‘presumably.’ Rarely were racism and racist institutional norms explicitly named among the range of plausible reasons for racial differences” (p. 15-16).

“Similarly reported in several articles were results that showed how persons of color perceived and experienced campus racial climates differently than their white counterparts. Few, however, considered structural/institutional racism as a logical explanation for such differences” (p. 17).

By examining the research produced by higher education institutions, Harper (2012) illustrated an important factor of campus climate not previously addressed in the literature. If faculty-led research does not address racial differences or will not seriously consider that racism and microaggressions are occurring on campus, what message does that send to minority students experiencing that reality? The research continued to discuss studies of student-faculty interaction and satisfaction, which concluded that students of color reported high interactions with faculty that was often coupled with low satisfaction. Harper (2012) stated the studies overlooked racial differences and negative racial relations and stereotypes as the reason for this discrepancy. Even in research designed to address issues of race on campus, faculty researchers were reluctant attribute negative findings to racism. This inability to dialogue on racism at an
institutional level is problematic, as Harper (2012) pointed out that stemming discussions of race on campus can create a campus climate that does not acknowledge racism and microaggressions as serious problems.

**One Combat Zone to the Next: Future Research on Microaggressions and Student Veterans in Higher Education**

As Hawn (2011) concluded:

“discussion and dialogue with military students in the classroom can be very beneficial to the veterans, civilian students, and professors alike. Their importance in reducing the culture gap between the military and civilian populations is evident, and encouraging positive interactions between these two groups can readily be accomplished in civilian higher education” (p. 261).

Veteran storytelling methods employed in the classroom setting served to information civilian students about the lived experiences of student veterans and veterans as a whole. This benefits both civilian students and student veterans, as civilian students broadened their world views and student veterans felt more understood and appreciated for their sacrifices. Hawn (2011) attested that this interaction strengthens learning outcomes for all students, particularly when military issues are pertinent to the course content.

Just as with research on microaggressions, most research on student veterans in the classroom points to a need for more information. There is a need for an outlet for student veteran narratives, whether that occurs inside or outside of the classroom. Future research should focus on specific student veteran experiences at Grand Valley State University (GVSU) as a means to better support the increasing student veteran population. Both Demers (2011) and Gwin et al. (2012) indicated research should be conducted in a “mixed methods” format, primarily relying on focus groups, interviews, and open-ended surveys to provide in-depth conversations about the
student veteran experience. Previously cited works demonstrated the parallels between microaggressions in the classroom and the challenges faced by student veterans in higher education.

Cate (2014) made a remark that despite a perceived myth that veterans were dropping or failing out of school, veterans were actually completing degree programs at rates similar to non-military students. What Cate (2014) did not provide is how and why this perceived myth is being perpetuated. If instructors or peer students are expecting student veterans to drop out, or erroneously assuming all student veterans suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, what kind of campus climate do student veterans experience? Will institutions then find themselves in a situation where the campus and classroom atmospheres are not veteran-friendly, and therefore cause student veterans to stop pursuing their degree programs? These questions demonstrate the need for more research on student veterans, particularly in a classroom setting with the characteristics of microaggressions outlined by Sue (2010) in mind.

One limitation found in almost every study was that the results cannot necessarily be generalized to every higher education institution or localized population. Research conducted at GVSU can highlight specific needs of the student veteran population on campus, and reveal their experiences in the classroom. GVSU has already implemented a Veteran’s Network (www.gvsu.edu/veterans) to serve these students, but additional information is needed to assess if student veterans are facing microaggressions in the classroom and campus climate. Another limitation to the research in this review is a lack of intersectionality. While McCabe (2009) paid particular attention to the intersections of race and gender, many others did not. In studying student veterans, it is critical to intersect the experiences of female student veterans as both women and veterans, as the needs of this population will be different from both female students
and male student veterans. An area of further exploration will be the prevalence of sexism in the classroom and how gendered microaggressions may prevent women veterans from pursuing degrees in male-dominated fields.

Much of the research on microaggressions used Critical Race Theory (CRT), which strongly values the narrative and lived experiences of the participants. The research on veteran reintegration also relied on narration and storytelling, which indicated that this would be the best method to carry out future research. One drawback of this is that the research does not always appear unbiased or objective. A tenant of CRT is dismantling oppression, so in a way the research already has an agenda. To continue forward with research regarding students with veteran status, a different theoretical framework may need to be applied.
Works Cited


Student Veterans of America, Washington, DC.


Works Consulted


